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TERRIFIER
ART THE CLOWN AT HALLOWEEN HORROR NIGHTS

BLACK PHONE 2
RETURN OF THE GRABBER

STRANGER THINGS
BEHIND THE SCENES OF SEASON FOUR

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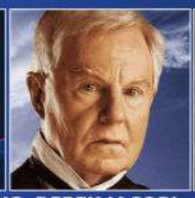

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DOCTOR WHO, VICIOUS
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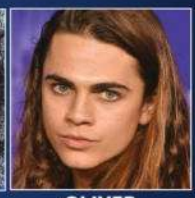
WEDNESDAY



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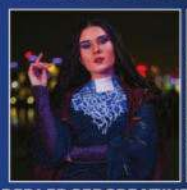

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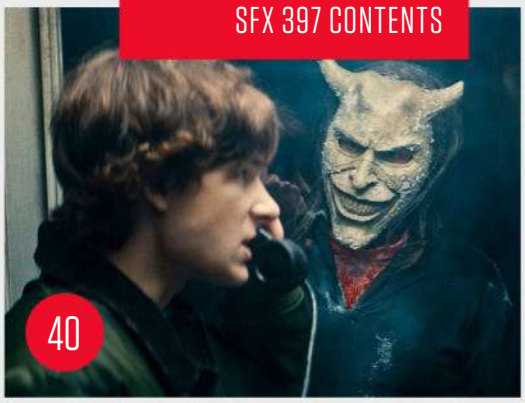

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All rise for the creepiest *Crown Court* ever.

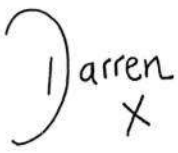
Captain's Log

My favourite time of year is here again – though I'm well aware I start getting ready for Halloween around June. Never let anyone tell you to stop doing what brings you joy! So obviously I'm very excited about our annual Halloween Horror Special, absolutely bursting with the latest exclusives for everything that goes bump in the night.

Having Pennywise return for nine new hours of lore-expanding, cinematic television is definitely a treat, not a trick, and the thing I've most been looking forward to in recent months. I think it's going to surprise – and genuinely terrify – people. He's not the only horror icon returning – we have the *other* clown-of-the-moment, Art, back in our pages, alongside Jason Voorhees, Frankenstein's Monster, Leprechaun and The Grabber.

It's been an absolutely mammoth year for horror, and that shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, we had enough material to fill two issues this month. I love this, of course, but once again I'm hoping things pick up on the sci-fi front too. For those who aren't the biggest fans of horror, don't worry – the spirits dissipate in the early hours of 1 November, bringing with them a new issue of *SFX* in the following days that features a heady mix of sci-fi, fantasy and retro classics!

See you in the fog...



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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Adored George Streicher's 2022 album *Music Of The Macabre*. The new follow-up, *Music For Halloween Night*, is just as wonderful, invoking many classic horrors.

→ Loving Danny Elfman's *Dark Universe* soundtrack, now on streaming platforms.

→ I had the most incredible time at Universal's Halloween Horror Nights in both Orlando *and* Hollywood. An absolute killer year, they've really knocked it out of the (theme) park.

RANTS

→ Being on set for *Talamasca: The Secret Order* was so much fun – just annoying I lost all my BTS photos when my phone was stolen!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Pleased to see that *The New Avengers* is getting a Blu-ray release on 10 November. Though I'm also slightly annoyed that I never got round to bingeing my DVD box set...

→ Instagram has taken to serving me posts from accounts by women who collect the exact outfits worn by the likes of Buffy, Willow and Cordelia. I'm not really the target demographic, but I've gotta say – it's kinda impressive.

→ Current reading: *Children Of The Wicker Man*, by Robin Hardy's sons Justin and Dominic, which looks it's going to offer an interesting new angle on this well-documented story.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Alien: Earth* was *so* unsettling. More please!

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ What a treat to see *Raiders*, *Temple Of Doom* and *The Last Crusade* back on the big screen. They belong in a cinema! I was in whip-cracking, snake-dodging heaven.

→ Check out *Through The Square Window*, an entertaining new podcast about vintage TV by Samira Ahmed and Graham Kibble-White. Lots of insights and nostalgia.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ If you're in Los Angeles sometime between now and summer 2026, get to the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures to see Jaws: The Exhibition. A deep-dive celebration of Spielberg's perfect film, including a mini-operational Bruce the Shark!

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

NOVEMBER 2025

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DAWN OF A NEW AGE

Three decades on from *Age of Apocalypse*, now the X-Men face the *Age Of Revelation*

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STAR TREK: KHAN

→ There's more to *Trek*'s protagonist than just Ceti eels in this new audio series.

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THE TERMINATOR

→ Find out what happens after Judgment Day in a new comic miniseries.

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HAZBIN HOTEL

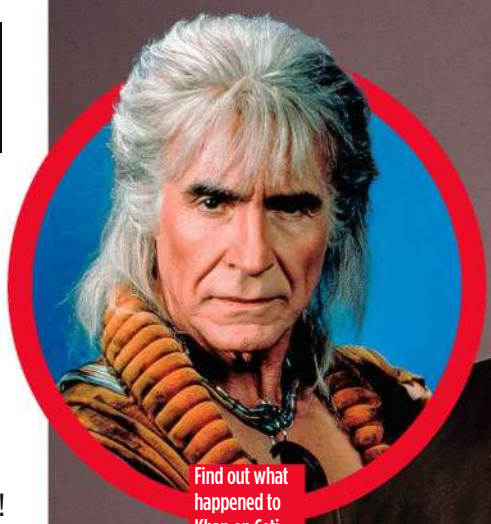
→ War comes to Hell in season two of Vivienne Medrano's adult animated musical series.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

To Eel And Back

This is Ceti Alpha V! Discover the untold story behind a legendary villain in new audio drama **Star Trek: Khan**

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



Find out what happened to Khan on Ceti Alpha V.

FORGET KLINGONS OR the Borg; Khan Noonien Singh stands as *Star Trek*'s greatest antagonist (would you argue with a chest like that?). Introduced in classic 1967 episode "Space Seed" before a vengeance-fuelled big-screen encore in *Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan* (1982), this genetically-engineered tyrant still casts a formidable shadow over the final frontier.

Now, a new audio drama is exploring the untold story of his exile on Ceti Alpha V, charting the tragic chain of events that gave us not only the death of Spock, but Kirk's eternally quotable cry of "Khaaaaaan!"

"It was the mystery that I saw at the heart of this thing when I began looking at it," says Kirsten Beyer, co-writer with David Mack of *Star Trek: Khan*, the long-running franchise's first scripted podcast. "The Khan we meet in 'Space Seed' is quite different from the Khan that we meet in *Wrath*, and I don't just mean that he's angry and vengeful and violent in the movie. The guy in 'Space Seed' has so many layers and there's so much going on there.

Naveen Andrews has stepped into Ricardo Montalban's shoes.

"The obvious question was, 'Well, how did that happen?' Beyond the few tidbits of facts that we learn in *The Wrath Of Khan*, like his planet exploded, his wife died and everything was laid waste? Clearly he had a hard time, but to me there was just so much more there than I remembered.

"The point of this exercise was you should be able to watch "Space Seed" and *The Wrath Of Khan*, and by the end of this story know exactly how he got there."

The nine-episode serial evolved from a TV pitch by Nicholas Meyer, writer and director of *The Wrath Of Khan*.

"I think they were working on it for a while," says Beyer, who served as staff writer on *Star Trek: Discovery* and was co-creator and executive producer of *Star Trek: Picard*. "I'm not 100% sure what all the behind-the-scenes stuff was, I just know that I was brought on to take what Nick had in terms of story and character and all of those ideas and, in the first place, really make sure that they lined up with *Star Trek* as it is now.

"Nick, quite famously, knew very little about *Star Trek* when he came in to write and direct Khan, and that was to *Star Trek*'s benefit, because it was a set of fresh, brilliant eyes that expanded what was possible in the most extraordinary ways. But when he made that film there were like 80 hours of *Star Trek* in existence, and now there are like 900! For better or worse, I have all that stuff in my head. So our first conversation was, 'A lot of the choices that you have made here unfortunately don't track with all these other things the universe has filled in for us since.' So that was a lot of the process. But it was also very much about honouring the vision he had, and the story that he wanted to tell about this guy, which was this tragedy."

Cast as Khan is *Lost*'s Naveen Andrews. "He brings so much wisdom and strength and complexity and just a deep, deep understanding of his humanity," Beyer tells *Red Alert*. "I was naturally concerned when we were about to start recording. What's going to happen in my head when he starts saying these lines? Because Ricardo Montalban is so strong in my ear. It's the only thing that's there.

"We got through the first scene and I was like, 'Oh, that's Khan too!' Somehow he has managed this magic trick of capturing the same essence that Montalban did, but also making it entirely his own."

George Takei, Wrenn Schmidt and Tim Russ are all part of the cast.

A framing story features cameos by *Star Trek* veterans George Takei as Captain Sulu, and Tim Russ, Voyager's resident Vulcan Tuvok, here an ensign on the USS Excelsior.

"I am so pleased that they both agreed to do it," says Beyer. "I was just delighted with the idea of writing Sulu some really deep, complex thoughts and ideas and making him an oppositional force in this story, for good reason. George was perfect. And Tim is one of my favourites. He just walked in and it was like, 'Yeah, there's Tuvok!'"

And naturally there's a star turn by Ceti Alpha V's most terrifying indigenous lifeform, the mind-sapping Ceti Eel.

"Again we're asking, 'What do we know about them and what don't we know about them?' Everybody knows you put them in your ear and bad stuff happens. But then we've found a new angle on that, just by playing with the science."

Star Trek: Khan is now available on podcast platforms.

NAVEEN ANDREWS PORTRAIT: DAVID NEEDLEMAN/CBS VIA GETTY. WRENN SCHMIDT PORTRAIT: BRIANA DUNNING. STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN © PARAMOUNT PICTURES.

SCI-FACT! **"Space Seed" co-writer Carey Wilber used the same premise for a *Captain Video* episode, only with a reawakened ancient Greek.**

SCI-FACT! **After *Bound For Ruin*, The Fallbacks next appeared in Jaleigh Johnson's recently released novel *Dealing With Dragons*.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Motley Crew

Dungeons & Dragons' The Fallbacks star in their first comic series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER FIRST appearing in Jaleigh Johnson's 2024 novel *Bound For Ruin*, The Fallbacks are now making their comics debut in a Dark Horse miniseries. But while they originated in a spin-off prose adventure, the disparate band of rogues and freebooters very much embody the spirit of *Dungeons & Dragons*, according to the four-parter's scripter Greg Pak.

"Jaleigh's books come from the game, so everything goes back to the source," Pak tells *Red Alert*. "So it was a huge gift to be able to build on the amazing characters and scenarios that Jaleigh created. The books are tons of fun, and the characters are so well-defined that I almost immediately internalised their voices and vibe. They're such a blast, as they're fresh and funny and contemporary without being anachronistic, and have real emotional depth and great conflict."

The group's composed of ambitious young rogue Tessalynde, pugnacious fighter Anson, self-taught wizard Cazrin, pragmatic cleric Baldric, secretive bard Lark, and pet otyugh Uggie, and Pak enjoys the chemistry between them. "They all have different motivations and philosophies that put them in conflict in big ways," he explains. "But the tiny conflicts are often even more fun than the big ones. There's a tiny moment in issue one where one character is constantly nudging another character in an annoying way, but then a third character effortlessly gets the results the first character wanted just because they've got a different relationship with the second character – which is a little opaque in the telling here, because I'm trying to avoid spoilers! But the result is a tiny little character bit that's just lovely, small and delicious, and those kinds of moments are solid gold in a huge fantasy story."

The story sees The Fallbacks crossing swords with a rival band of thieves after embarking on their most daring heist yet, and Pak has liaised closely with *Dungeons & Dragons* rights holders Wizards Of The Coast. "They're providing that deep expertise in the lore that lets us dig into fun bits that long-time *D&D* players may get a big kick out of," he says.

"The story starts in Loudwater and right away we're having fun, fleshing out the nature of the town and how it's ruled and hinting at the forgotten past of its Lieges. We're also introducing some brand new characters, one of whom in particular I hope you'll hate and love a lot!"

Crediting them for "making this fantastical world feel real and thrilling while delivering on the little character moments that are the beating heart of the story", Pak praises artists Wilton Santos and Edvan Alves. "There's a lot of subtle – and not-so-subtle – humour and a lot of heart in the story, and their expressive lines and Raul Angulo's lovely colours bring out all that emotion and life," he says. "And letterer Nate Piekos's lively, subtly organic vibe really matches the world, as the captions are scrolls! We've also got a singing bard and a spellcasting wizard, and Nate's developed great ways to make you hear those different sounds. It's awesome!"

Dungeons & Dragons: The Fallbacks is out on 16 October.

The Fallbacks are striking out on their own for the first time.

SCI-FACT! The first *The Terminator* comic was published by NOW Comics from 1988 to 1990. It followed resistance fighters in 2031.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Metalheads

Its Judgement Day for Declan Shalvey and Rory McConville as they launch **Terminator: Metal**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER DECLAN SHALVEY'S RECENT 10-PARTER BASED around 1984's classic *The Terminator*, he and new co-writer Rory McConville are now upping the ante with *Terminator: Metal*, which takes place in the more expansive world of James Cameron's 1991 sequel, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.

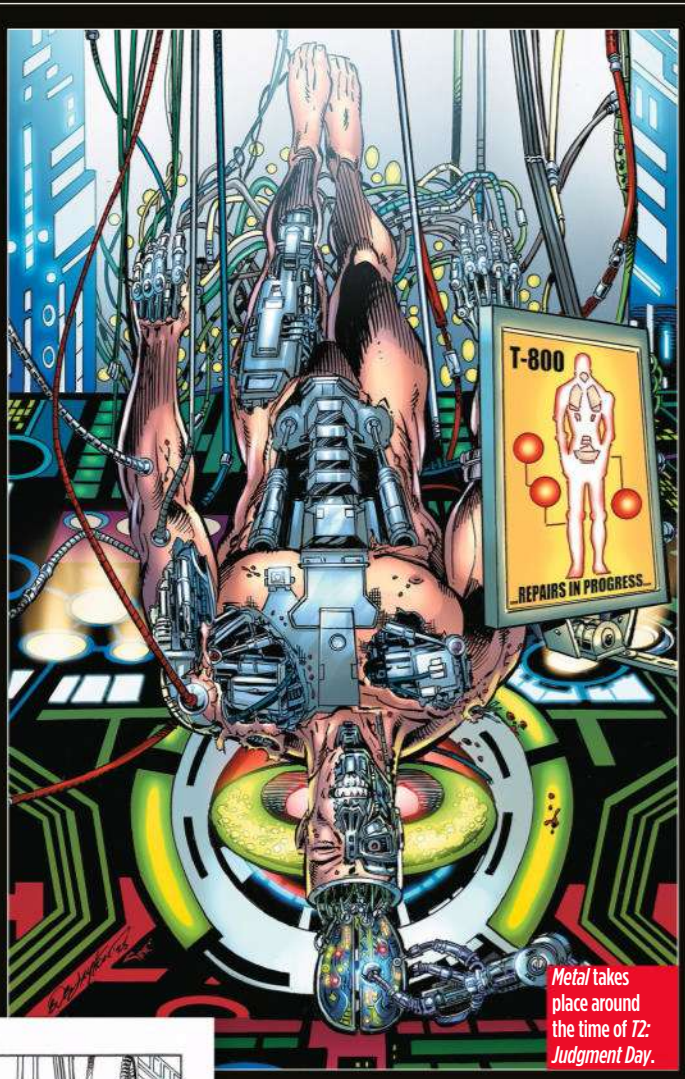
"It's very much an evolution from the previous series, as it became clear while I was working on it that there was room for a lot more stories in this world," Shalvey tells *Red Alert*. "*Terminator: Metal* gives us the opportunity to dig into a wider tapestry of ideas."

Just as before, *Metal* is mostly composed of self-contained storylines. "We're sticking with the done-in-one format and switching locations, etc..." says Shalvey. "There's not so much of an overarching plot this time, more of an overarching theme, so there's no limit on what we can say or do."

As in *Judgment Day*, questions arise as to whether Terminators can ever be trusted, as some are reprogrammed before apparently switching sides. "On the surface, the war between humanity and the machines is a very straightforward conflict of good vs evil, but we'll be digging into more of those grey areas as the series progresses," says McConville, whose previous collaboration with Shalvey, Image Comics series *Time Before Time*, also delved into time travel, "featured a robot", and was very much about not changing time.

"I love a good rewriting the past story, but too often the time travel element ends up overwhelming the story and distracting from the characters," he continues. "There'll still be a decent amount of time-travelling Terminator missions in this series, but our main focus is exploring what life is like for people post-Judgment Day, particularly for those who aren't the big players we've met before."

"As much as I love time travel stories and how wild they can get, they can often become convoluted when you start playing with timelines, and as a result can lose the drama of consequences," adds Shalvey. "My approach to *Terminator* was similar since much of the future we see from the franchise is actually set in our past or present, in the 40 years since the first film. My previous approach was that Judgment Day actually happened, so there's no stopping or changing it, no matter how hard we try. Now in this series we focus more on how humanity deals with the fallout of that significant event."



Metal takes place around the time of *T2: Judgment Day*.

Lorenzo Re is back on illustration duties.

With Shalvey stressing that the title is *Terminator: Metal* not *Liquid Metal*, don't expect to see the T-1000. "The T-800 is the star of the book, although the T-600 might pop up again," he teases. "If the book succeeds like I hope, it would be interesting to dig into other Skynet technology."

After drawing some issues of the previous series, Lorenzo Re returns to illustrate. "His style really effectively captures the tech-noir horror of the first film in particular," says McConville. "The opening story is set entirely in the future war era, and he does an incredible job of conveying the gritty bleakness of life in this time."

Terminator: Metal is out on 22 October.

They're not giving welcoming vibes here...

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Daughter Of Darkness

Charlie Morningstar faces down hellish foes in **Hazbin Hotel** season two

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

HELL IS GETTING even more complicated in season two of Prime Video's hit *very* adult animated musical comedy *Hazbin Hotel*. An original series created by Vivienne Medrano based on her Patreon-funded YouTube series, it centres on the battle between Heaven and Hell, just with dirty songs and lots of blush-worthy story points.

Charlie Morningstar (Erika Henningsen) is the daughter of Lucifer (Jeremy Jordan) and she wants to solve Hell's overpopulation problem by peacefully rehabilitating souls in her Hazbin Hotel.

Once redeemed, they can head up to Heaven and clear some space. However, her disruption of the norms between Heaven and Hell pisses off a *lot* of major players, inciting a battle in the first season finale that Charlie ultimately won.

Now she's got an even busier hotel, resentful souls nursing grudges against Heaven, and a Hell-based overlord trio known as the Vees – Vox (Christian Borle), Velvette (Lilli Cooper) and Valentino (Joel Perez) – who want to take over Heaven.

Already hard at work on seasons three and four of *Hazbin*, Medrano tells Red Alert that she's excited for audiences to see a much tighter, stronger paced second season. "What's unique about this season is that it has a lot more focus on characters that might not have had a ton of development in season one," she says.

"I also feel like we get more time with the villain, which I think is a really nice shake-up from season one."

Charlie's primary headache this season is Vox, who Medrano says will challenge the hotelier all season long as they both explore the theme of identity from their opposing viewpoints. "He's a villain who's very capable of taking her good intentions and spinning them," Medrano explains.

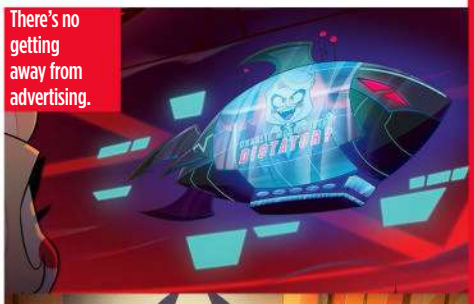
"He's not afraid to lie or manipulate to get the narrative on his side. Whereas Charlie struggles with false narratives and a picture painted of her that isn't entirely accurate, and I think that's a very relatable thing.

> **"We have more time to spend with the hotel characters"**

"Personally, this season had a lot [that was] hitting close to home for me," she says, referring to how she became a lightning rod for internet criticism about everything from unsubstantiated plagiarism claims to beefs about proper character design.

As such, her experiences as a woman on the internet in a showrunner position very much informed Charlie's arc this season. "There's a little bit of realness in Charlie's arc this season," she asserts. "And I really love that. I think it's gonna be fun for everyone to see that it's more of an internal struggle as much as it is an external struggle this season for Charlie." With Vox, she says, "We were able to set up the

"Welcome to the Hotel Hazbin... such a lovely place."



There's no getting away from advertising.

Angels or demons? Pretty much the latter.

Get to know the employees a little bit better.

groundwork for him in season one that allowed us to seamlessly move into what his plan is with the Vees to essentially take over Heaven and be this powerful entity. We learn, as we go through the season, where that desire and hunger come from, and some of the motivating factors that might be surprising from a villain like him. I'm very excited because there are parts of the story where he does heinous villain things, but there are also other parts where we might learn something about him that almost makes us feel bad for him. That's my favourite thing to do in storytelling, so I'm excited that I got to do it with a character I really love."

Marley's ghost knows this feeling very well.

Medrano says the Hazbin employees will get a little more love this time around too. "We have a little bit more time to spend with the hotel characters, like Niffty [Kimiko Glenn] and new character Baxter [Kevin Del Aguila], that are a little bit more comic relief and a little bit more simplistic in their characterisation but are *very* impactful and fun."

She also confirms that the season will continue to be ambitious with its Broadway-style songs by composers Sam Haft and Andrew Underberg. "The musical element is important for me because, as a fan of musicals, I feel like musicals have a very bad reputation," she offers.

"I think this makes musicals very accessible in a way that people might be more open to the kind of musicality that we do because it's so diverse and in a story that they care about."

With the show's growing buzz and passionate fandom, Medrano says she's proud that *Hazbin Hotel* stands out as something very different. "We have this very Warner Bros meets Disney style that I've developed over the years that also has the sharpness and the edginess of some of the darker shows that I grew up with. That sets it apart from basically anything else in adult animation, at least right now."

Hazbin Hotel is on Prime Video from 29 October.

SCI-FACT! **Jeremy Jordan, who plays Lucifer, starred as Winn Schott in *Supergirl* and *The Flash*.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

X-tinction Event

Marvel marks Age Of Apocalypse's 30th anniversary with new crossover **Age Of Revelation**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

THE MERRY MUTANTS' FIRST crossover since the end of the Krakoan period and last year's relaunch of Marvel's X-line, *Age Of Revelation* harks back to *Age Of Apocalypse*, which had a similar cataclysmic impact when it was first published in 1995. Described by *X-Men* group editor Tom Brevoort as "a big swing", it involved the entire Earth-616 reality being replaced by a new grim totalitarian world ruled over by the immortal mutant villain.

"In those pre-internet days, the announcement that the entire *X-Men* line of titles was ending set the fan community on fire, and then the rollout of the *Age Of Apocalypse* books generated tons of excitement," recalls Brevoort. "So it's remembered not so much because the story was so compelling, but because of how extremely it changed the landscape of the line for several months, and for how absolutely bananas an idea it was."

Set around a decade into the future, *Age Of Revelation* actually owes more to another classic X-Men storyline. "There's probably more *Days Of Future Past* in it than *Age Of Apocalypse*," says Brevoort, confirming that like its predecessor, *Age Of Revelation* will "absolutely impact on the present-day affairs of the Marvel Universe across the next year. To be more specific, two characters from the present will find themselves in the world 10 years hence and experience these events directly."

Spinning out of 2024's *Heir Of Apocalypse*, *Age Of Revelation* has an unexpected instigator in the form of the previously unassuming Doug Ramsey (aka Cypher), who, with his enhanced language abilities, was one of the weakest mutants until he assumed the mantle of Revelation and succeeded Apocalypse himself. "The premise of *Heir Of Apocalypse* was that one of the 16 characters within it was going to become the titular Heir Of Apocalypse and carry on his work on Earth while he removed himself to Arakko," explains Brevoort, referring to *X-Men Red*'s terraformed Mars. "After looking over all of the assorted players, we landed on Doug as the most unlikely selection, and the one that would knock over the fewest apple carts. But in doing so, I wanted to make certain his transformation and the fallout of that story would be something we'd get back to in a meaningful way, as otherwise there'd be no point in doing it."

Beginning with this month's *Overture* one-shot, all the monthly X-books are being supplanted by new titles. *X-Men* is becoming

The entire *X-Men* line will be replaced by new titles.

Emma Frost and Tony Stark reunite in *Iron And Frost*.

Lucas Werneck's cover art for *Unbreakable X-Men* #1.

Amazing X-Men, while *Uncanny X-Men* is now *Unbreakable X-Men* and *Exceptional X-Men* is *Expatriate X-Men*. There's also *Undeadpool* and *Laura Kinney: Sabretooth*, while Phoenix adopts Carol Danvers's former alias in *Binary*. "They all reflect the story contents and that's where most of them came from," says Brevoort. Intriguingly there are also some related releases from the wider Marvel Universe, including *X-Vengers*, *Radioactive Spider-Man* and *Cloak Or Dagger*.

"We wanted this to have a greater scope than something merely confined to the *X-Men* universe, although the core story is centred there for the most part," adds Brevoort. "It's fun in a way that wasn't always possible in the past, having an *X-Men* event spilling out across the Marvel Universe as though it was an *Avengers* or *Fantastic Four* event, and I'd expect that to become more of a regular thing moving forward."

Returning to Emma Frost and Tony Stark's short-lived marriage in 2022-2024's *Invincible Iron Man*, miniseries *Iron And Frost* reunites the Heartless Queen with the Armoured Avenger in the ruins of New York. "*Age Of Revelation* provides the context and the backdrop for *Iron And Frost*," says writer Cavan Scott. "The events of the wider story are going

> **"We wanted this to have greater scope than the X-Men universe"**

to have a profound impact on the events of our series and how everything plays out."

With Scott revealing "The Iron King has remade the former den of degeneracy in his own image," the three-parter centres around the rise of a new Hellfire Club leader. "Our action starts a little way into *Age Of Revelation* as Tony and Emma work together with War Machine and Firestar to protect mutants from Revelation's minions," he teases. "Tragedy strikes and the former lovers are separated, apparently forever. When they next meet, they're not the characters we recognise..."

According to Scott, artist Ruairi Coleman has contributed to the overall storytelling process. "He made some smart suggestions when we were designing the look of our characters that really played into the story," he says. "Shifting the relationship between War Machine and his daughter, which is probably a spoiler and is definitely important to *Iron And Frost*. I love how clean his style is, which works so well when you realise what's happened to Tony and Emma, who are not the couple they were!"

X-Men: Age Of Revelation Overture/Amazing X-Men are out now. Unbreakable X-Men/Iron And Frost are out on 15 October, and Expatriate X-Men is out on 29 October.

SCI-FACT! **Like the recent *Giant-Sized X-Men*, *Age Of Apocalypse* was instigated by Legion travelling back in time and changing history.**

SCI-FACT! **Universal Studios Florida held its first Halloween event in 1991, when it was called Fright Nights.**

BOOK OF THE DEAD

If you're a fan of Universal's Halloween Horror Nights – and yes, we know a few – you should check out unofficial publication *Horrors Untold*. It digs into the history of the event's previous 33 years in Orlando, but also mixes a found-footage fiction element with puzzles to create an immersive horror mystery book. **Visit horrorsuntold.com**.

ATTACK-IN-THE-BOX

Another range of figures in blind boxes to drive you into a collecting frenzy, these three-inch cinematic terrors from Just Play all feature a scary scene from their movies reflected in their eyes – hence "Terrif-Eyes". Series one of Tiny Nightmares includes Michael Myers, M3GAN, Pennywise, Gill-man, Chucky, Tiffany, the Bride and Valak. **Visit amazon.co.uk**.

MICKEY'S NOT-SO-SCARY

Not everything for Halloween has to be horror, and you can always rely on Mickey Mouse and his gang to bring a bit of cosy to the creepy. The Disney Store has re-produced the giant pumpkins from their theme parks, in addition to ranges based on *Hocus Pocus* and *The Haunted Mansion*. They also do a super-cute *Star Wars* Halloween Countdown Calendar! **Visit disneystore.co.uk**.

NEW AUTHOR

HAYLEY GELFUSO

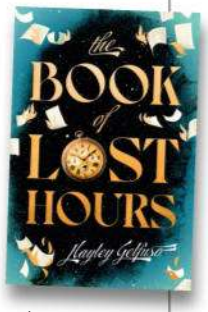
MEET THE WRITER BEHIND TIME-TRAVEL ROMANCE *THE BOOK OF LOST HOURS*

GELFOCUS PHOTOGRAPHY

Tell us about your protagonist.

Lisavet Levy is the daughter of a watchmaker in Nuremberg. On Kristallnacht, her father hides her inside the timespace, an interdimensional library where memories of the dead are kept inside books. Over time, she discovers people known as timekeepers who enter the timespace to burn books and change the past. Her story becomes one of resistance, saving as many memories as she can.

Was there a particular spark of inspiration?



The idea came to me while reading *The Library: A Fragile History* by Andrew Pettegree and Arthur Der Weduwen. There was a specific line: "here it is the dead who speak to those who work". Immediately, this image of a library where the dead literally speak to the living jumped into my head.

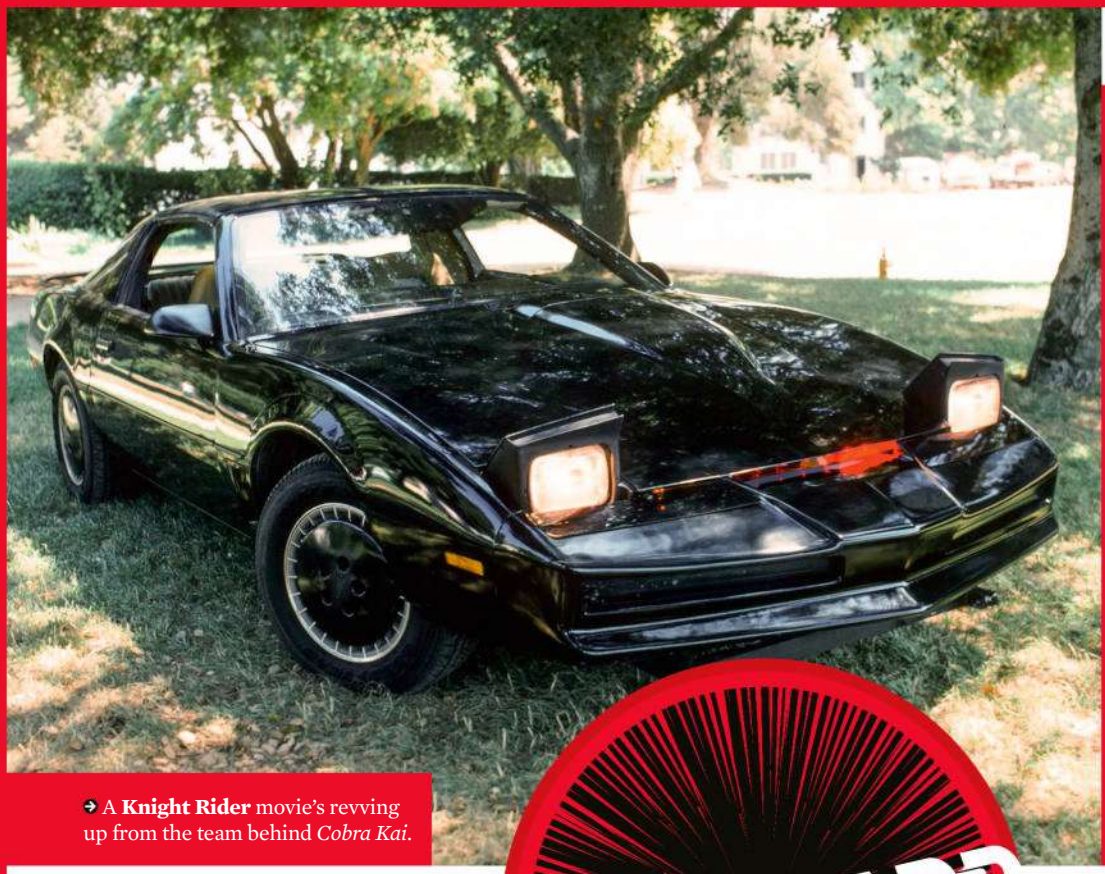
How long did it take to write?

It spent about a year and a half in its "gestation period". I was taking notes, outlining, doing research and letting the idea wander. During that time, I also drafted about 90,000 words. It wasn't until I got to the heart of the story that everything came together. Once I understood that, I wrote the entire novel in about six weeks.

Got any advice for budding authors?

Give in to your wildest ideas: the strange ones, the impractical ones, the ones that make you think, "There's no way I can pull that off." That's usually where the magic lives.

The Book Of Lost Hours is out on 6 November, published by Atlantic.



A **Knight Rider** movie's revving up from the team behind *Cobra Kai*.

Who wants to live forever? **Karen Gillan** is Heather, Connor MacLeod's all too mortal first wife, in Chad Stahelski's **Highlander** reboot. Also joining the cast are **Djimon Hounsou** and Chinese martial arts star **Max Zhang**.

NEWSWARP

Breaking Genre News!

Faster than a speeding bullet... James Gunn's **Man Of Tomorrow** arrives 9 July 2027. According to the DCU screen supremo it's "a story about Lex Luthor and Superman having to work together to a certain degree against a much, much bigger threat". Filming begins in April.

Matt Smith, **Mia Goth**, **Amy Adams** and **Aaron Pierre** join **Ryan Gosling** in **Star Wars: Starfighter**. Directed by Shawn Levy, it's set to open 28 May 2027, marking 50 years of the Force on the big screen.

Apple TV+ has ordered a fourth season of **Foundation**. "We look forward to continuing the epic, emotional storytelling that defined the first three seasons of the show," say showrunners Ian Goldberg and David Kob, in dazzling unison.

The Conjuring franchise is set to become a TV series on HBO Max, showrun by *Jessica Jones*' Nancy Won.

Legendary to bring SenLinYu's dark fantasy **Alchemised** to the screen.

Annabelle: Creation's David F Sandberg is set to helm a reimagining of **The Amityville Horror**. The screenplay is by *The Conjuring: Last Rites*' Ian Goldberg and Richard Naing.

Hannah John-Kamen and **Josh Holloway** to star in apocalyptic disaster thriller **One Second After**. Scott Rogers directs from a script by *Babylon 5* overlord J Michael Straczynski.

Guillermo del Toro is currently prepping an adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel **The Buried Giant**. "It is going to be an epic stop-motion that is not going to be for kids," he promises.

Dwayne Johnson confirms he's filming a third *Jumanji* in November.

There's a belated sequel to 2015's *The Last Witch Hunter* on the way. **Vin Diesel** returns as the immortal Kaulder with **Michael Caine** in talks to reprise the role of Dolan 36th.

Amazon has greenlit a TV series based on the **Life Is Strange** gaming franchise, following a photography student with the power to rewind time. *Kaos*' Charlie Covell is the showrunner.

Severance's **Tramell Tillman** is joining the cast of *Spider-Man: Brand New Day*.

Netflix animated series *Tomb Raider: The Legend Of Lara Croft* (with **Hayley Atwell** as the voice of Lara) is about to meet its final deathtrap. It's set to end after the second season in December.

But wait! There's a new, live-action Lara Croft in the form of *Game Of Thrones* star **Sophie Turner**, who'll trot the globe in Prime Video's upcoming *Tomb Raider* series from Phoebe Waller-Bridge.

Sam Raimi will produce a remake of **Magic**, the 1978 horror that starred Anthony Hopkins as a ventriloquist whose dummy pushes him to murder. *Freddy vs Jason*'s Damian Shannon and Mark Swift are the writers.

Masters of the Spider-Verse Phil Lord and Christopher Miller are to produce a live-action movie based on the **Archie Comics** universe.

The Archie comics go live-action. Why? Why not?

KNIGHT RIDER: FRANK CARROLL/NBCU PHOTO BANK/GETTY. KAREN GILLAN: LEXIE MORELAND/WWD VIA GETTY. JUMANJI © COLUMBIA PICTURES. ARCHIE © ARCHIE COMIC PUBLICATIONS INC.

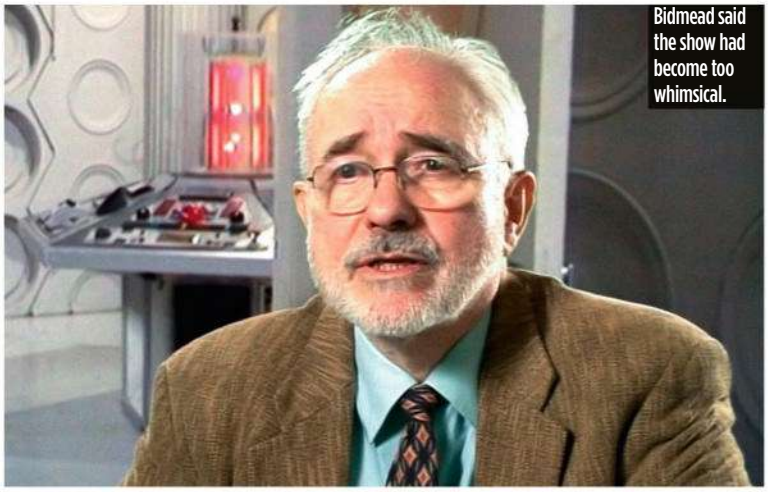
SCI-FACT! On Tom Baker's departure in 1981, Christopher Bidmead suggested former girlfriend Helen Mirren for the role of the Doctor.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

CHRISTOPHER H BIDMEAD 1941–2025

Remembering *Doctor Who*'s champion of hard science

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



Bidmead said the show had become too whimsical.

© BBC

"I SAW IT AS A RENOVATION job, like taking layers of soot off a valuable painting," Christopher Hamilton Bidmead told the fanzine *Whotopia* in 2008, remembering his time as script editor on *Doctor Who*. "I hated glib pseudo-science gobbledygook, I hated mere magic."

Born in Bolton, Lancashire, Bidmead won a scholarship to RADA and initially pursued a career as an actor, performing with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Dismayed by the quality of the BBC radio dramas he appeared in, he turned to writing, contributing scripts to Thames Television and journalism for *New Scientist*.

Recommended to executive producer Barry Letts by former *Who* scriptwriter Robert Banks Stewart, Bidmead joined the series in late 1979. He brought a mandate to expunge the whimsy of his predecessor, Douglas Adams – "*Doctor Who* had become just too silly" – and favoured an approach that found a cool, cerebral poetry in hard science. "*Doctor Who* was a medieval mystery play with a touch of Sherlock Holmes and Raffles," he once observed.

His year on the show was a time of transition. The sombre series 18 saw the exit of Romana and K-9 and the introduction of new companions Adric, Nyssa and Tegan. Bidmead himself wrote Tom Baker's final story, "Logopolis", a knotty, funereal era-closer that drew on his real-life passion for computer technology.

Leaving the post of script editor, he returned to write "Castrovalva", Peter Davison's introductory story, inspired by the mind-bending art of MC Escher. "Frontios", another Fifth Doctor adventure, followed in 1984. Bidmead would novelise all three of his *Doctor Who* stories for Target Books. "The Hollows Of Time" and "Pinacotheca", two adventures written for Colin Baker's incarnation of the Time Lord, never made it to the screen. After *Doctor Who*, Bidmead returned to the world of computer journalism.

MOVIE POSTER IMAGE ART/GETTY

JOE CAROFF 1921–2025

Created in 1962, Joe Caroff's 007 logo would become an indelible part of James Bond's visual identity: branding with a licence to kill. Born in New Jersey, Caroff trained at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn before serving in the Air Force. After World War II he worked as a book designer and then a movie poster artist.

United Artists asked him for a promotional logo for *Dr No*, the first Bond film, initially for use as a letterhead. "The basic concept... sprang from writing 007 and instantly realising that the 7 was a great handle," he remembered. "Adding the barrel and trigger was pure joy."

He was paid $300 and received no credit. "I never made a big thing of it," said Caroff, whose work included posters for *A Hard Day's Night*, *West Side Story* and *Rollerball*. "It was a job. I wanted to get it done. I always met my deadlines."

SCOTT SPIEGEL 1957–2025

Born in Birmingham, Michigan, Scott Spiegel befriended Sam Raimi in high school and played Scotty in the 1978 horror short "Within The Woods", Raimi's proof-of-concept precursor to 1981's *The Evil Dead*.

He went on to write and direct 1989's grocery-store slasher *Intruder* and also helmed 1999's direct-to-video sequel *From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money* and 2004's *My Name Is Modesty*, based on the *Modesty Blaise* newspaper strip and executive produced by Quentin Tarantino.

Spiegel formed the production company Raw Nerve with Eli Roth and Boaz Yakin. He produced 2005's *Hostel* and directed 2011's *Hostel: Part III*. He also served as producer on *2001 Maniacs* (2005), a horror comedy starring Robert Englund.

Raimi cast his old friend as the Rooftop Pizza Thief in *Spider-Man 2* (2004). Spiegel also voiced the Souls of the Damned in Raimi's *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* (2022).

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Slay, queen! The killer doll returns
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BATMAN: CAPED CRUSADER
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HOUSE OF THE DRAGON
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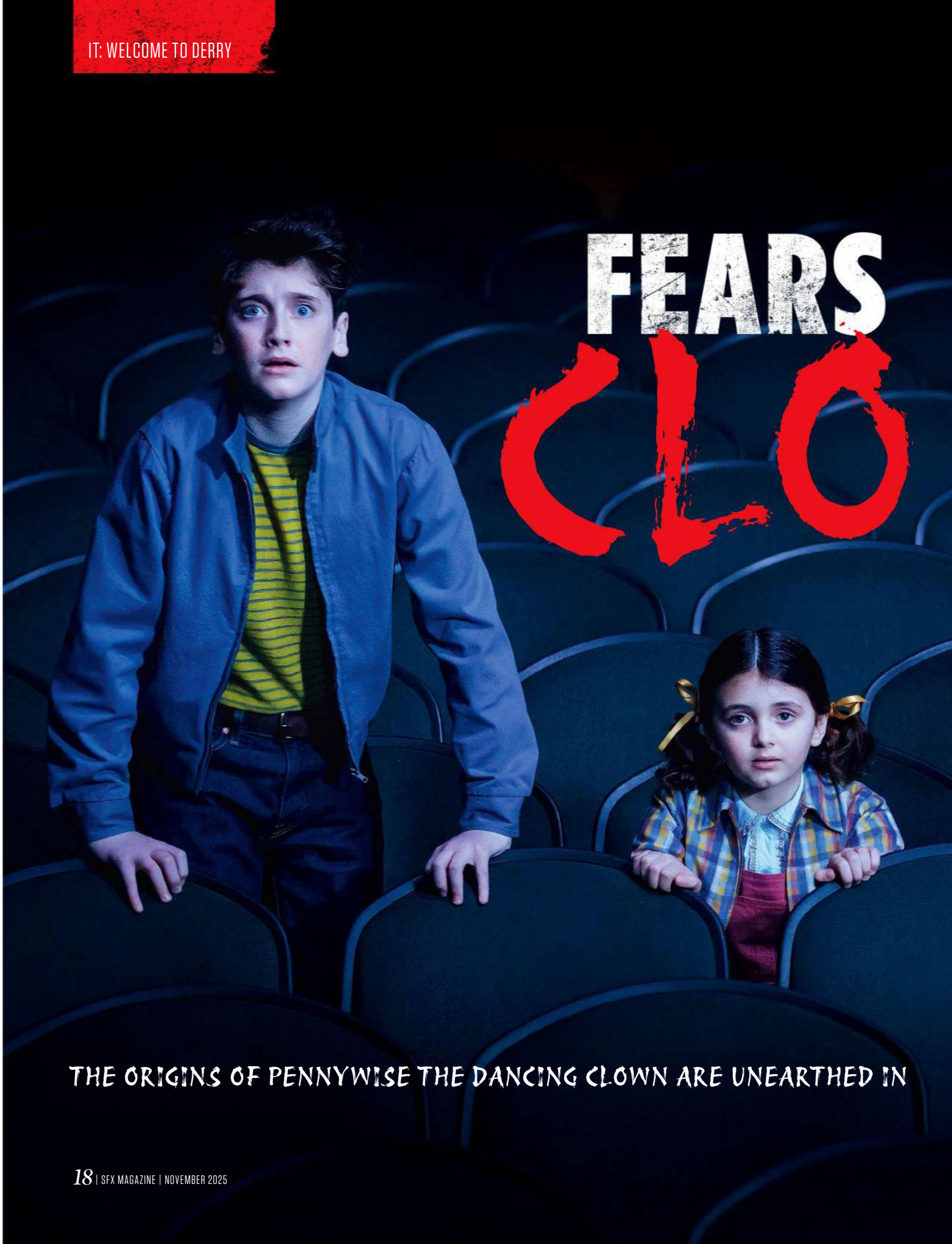


THE ORIGINS OF PENNYWISE THE DANCING CLOWN ARE UNEARTHED IN

OF A WN

THE HIGHLY ANTICIPATED PREQUEL SERIES IT: WELCOME TO DERRY

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

WHEN YOUR LONG-AWAITED FEATURE film adaptation of one of Stephen King's biggest novels breaks box office records, becoming the highest-grossing horror film of all time, it's a no-brainer that talk is swiftly going to turn to continuing the franchise.

But director Andy Muschietti's two *It* movies (2017/2019) told the story of the Losers Club and the ultimate defeat of Pennywise the Dancing Clown with nowhere left to go – except backwards.

Andy says that it was while work was completing on the second movie that conversations with Pennywise star Bill Skarsgård gravitated to a prequel and the character of Bob Gray, the real person behind the clown in the original book.

While the treatment of Bob Gray in prose is very cryptic, *It: Welcome To Derry* – a nine-episode television series starting this month – aims to explore that mythos in detail.

"Who was Bob Gray and how did It take the shape of the clown? What were the circumstances, the events surrounding it and how did it happen?" Andy asks. "We were very excited about that for a while, then life happened and we went in two different directions. During *The Flash* I came back to *It* and to the subject of the book. The interludes were something that created gravity. It's these stories in the book, from the past, that are very mysterious and they're big, big question marks of the past, of It in Derry.

"Before too long I had this idea of telling the story backwards," he explains. "For a very specific reason that I can't tell yet because it's part of the mystery of the big arc of *Welcome To Derry*, which is designed as three seasons. At the end of season one you realise why we would tell the story backwards.

"In terms of cycles, season one is 1962, season two is 1935 and season three is 1908. Along the way, there will be more crossovers between the timelines, so there will be more 1908 in season two, more than we expected."

Ryan Grant Little's character in a spot of bother.

PICTURES: WARNER BROS/HBO MAX. STOCK IMAGES: NENOV/GETTY

They all float down here... Bill Skarsgård as Pennywise.

“In terms of cycles, season one is 1962, season two is 1935 and season three is 1908”

But there’s no *It* without Pennywise, and leading man Skarsgård had his reservations.

“I think he was a little hesitant at the beginning to play It again because he is something that he did in the past,” Andy considers. “Also, at that point, when we started talking about the series as something that was real and tangible, he had played a lot of very dark characters, and he was a little hesitant to go into it again. Because, obviously, for someone that takes his work and his art so seriously as him, it takes a toll to live in the head of those characters for a long time.

“So he was a little hesitant at the beginning – and then something changed. I guess that we started again, going into it and discussing all the virtues of this new story and he decided to do it.”

Muschietti’s sister Barbara, co-creator and executive producer, adds: “Because there was a lot more Bob Gray exploration, which we had talked to in the past, and we even had discussed making a third movie about Bob Gray before he was taken over by It and became Pennywise.

“This became a good little piece of candy to play with. We saw him having a really good time doing it. So it was nice to see him, especially in the Bob Gray moments when he’s more distended, have fun.”

Clara Stack, Boone Storm and Hunter Storm Baker.

Racial prejudice is sure to rear its ugly head.

Stephen Rider with Ryan Grant Little (right).

THE BIG BANG

While the book’s interludes which the series draws from are quite succinct, *Welcome To Derry* builds new mythology on these moments.

“We started with the basic content, which is the big events, the big disasters or the big auguries of each cycle,” Andy explains. “The →

There's something rotten in the state of Derry.

"I don't care, you're still going to school."

burning of the Black Spot, the massacre of the Bradley gang and the explosion of the Easter egg hunt. These are big events in the mythology of *It*. Every time that It wakes up, there's a big catastrophic event and at the end of that cycle, there's another catastrophic event.

"So in theory, in those three cycles, there are six big paroxysms of violence, but in the book, Stephen King gravitates around these three. So we basically built stories around these events. We put the characters around these events.

"Some of the characters are new, our part of invention. Some characters are in the book and some are not, but they are related to our heroes, to characters that appear in the movie, like the Losers Club. So basically the ancestry of the Losers Club, we play a lot with that." King, they say, is "a big supporter because he really loves the movies" – something they say is "very humbling". Everything they did on this project was shared with him for his blessing.

"He gives us a lot of rope and he's actually very enthusiastic whenever we show him new characters or new stories, he's been amazing. It's just truly a pleasure," Barbara adds.

"For Stephen it's a very special era because it was the era where he was a child," Andy continues. "He has a lot of insight of that era and his thoughts and notes are related to his experience as a child. Not only as the creator of the book, but in this back and forth that we have, there's a lot of details that you can not get unless you're talking to someone from that generation.

"One of the most special moments that we had in all these developments is Steve writing an email and saying, 'Well, we didn't use the word fuck a lot when we were kids. Actually, if you said fuck or fucking in front of someone, you would expect to be knocked down.' So he wrote a whole email about the word fucking because, of course, there's a lot of cursing in our movies."

IN PLAIN SIGHT

With a modern movie-going generation well-versed in the machinations of Pennywise, how do you up the stakes for people who know what to expect?

"People never know what to expect from Pennywise," Barbara grins. "That's the trick. He's absolutely unpredictable, and that's what we love, and that's the freedom we allow ourselves. We are never to know what trickery →

Miles Ekhardt also starred in *Turtles All the Way Down*.

TAYLOUR PAIGE is CHARLOTTE HANLON

What can you tell us about your character?
I don't know what I'm allowed to reveal yet! I can say that I'm a woman who is new to Derry. I moved to this town with my family, and we're new and we are melanated. So in 1962 we're not perhaps that welcome in this new town and my family is navigating that.

You haven't done a project as intense as this, horror-wise.
No, I haven't. I'm naturally very much a scaredy cat. So I maybe accidentally manifested horror because somewhere I said to someone that I'd be great at horror because I'm so scared. But this, you've got all the elements for a really great production. You have Andy and Barbara, you have an incredible cast, and it's Stephen King – one of the greatest minds of

Charlotte Hanlon (Taylour Paige).

all time. I felt pretty held and supported in all of the things that give the potential to something really good.

This might have been my gateway to liking horror. I do love *The Shining*. I can do a good psychological thriller. Really, what scarred me, what made me really not like horror, was *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

That was just *too much*. That just had me go, "Oh, no, that's it. No, I'm good." That movie really did it for me. Like, *really* did it for me. It's awful. But I am fascinated at how people really enjoy the genre and I do envy that they can enjoy it.

What were the '60s period drama elements like for you?

We had the most incredible costume designer. The costumes and your shoes and your wig and your make-up – it all, from the telephones to the television, to the production [design], is also a character and lends itself to you being able to believe what you're doing. I find it really fun and spiritual that in a way we were playing our ancestors, because I was imagining my grandmother in 1962 and because the Hanlons moved from the South, from Shreveport, Louisiana.

My family is from the South also, from Texas, Louisiana. So I was just imagining what that's like, growing up in 1962 America in this post-racial, post-Jim Crow economic boom, it was like existing in an archive. It was really cool.

Were you aware of the *It* movies?

I was aware. I've only heard phenomenal things, but I just stayed away [laughs] until I couldn't any more, until this wonderful opportunity presented itself and I met with Barbara and Andy on a Sunday and we talked for two hours and it was done. I was like, "Well, these guys aren't scary." But they're just brilliant at it. Of course, horror – that is the genre, that's the *container*, but the story is also about how fear and love live in the same house. It's about the power of belief.

> **"This might have been my gateway to liking horror"**

The kids are the only ones that can see the clown and just that childlike wonder and imagination and preying on each individual's fears... there's some really mystical universal truths without it just being about horror and gore.

If you haven't seen the films, seeing Bill Skarsgård in costume presumably doesn't impact you as much?

I saw *It* [the 1990 miniseries] when I was a kid at a friend's sleepover and that was enough for me. But when I see Bill, though he does look terrifying, I'm really just so intrigued by the craft. He is just *so* incredible at what he does. There's so much dimension in how he goes about it. There's so much care and specificity and nuance and patience and there's so much restraint, even though it's very physical and requires all these different vocal registers. I was just fascinated at *him*.

What were the most challenging parts of filming?

We had some really long days, and they were every day. There were days [where] it was 16 hours sometimes. There was something that took us a month and a half to shoot because of where it was and how complicated and how many people.

For me personally, I really wanted to get the dialect correct, so I worked with my dialect coach Jane Fujita. There's a little bit of code-switching with Charlotte, my character, in how she speaks when she's just in the intimacy of her family and then the voice that she has when she's out in the world – the mask that Charlotte has to wear to go through the world with dignity.

To not be judged, to appear educated, to have a chance at someone acknowledging her existence, she has to speak really articulately. So I was really specific with having almost two voices.

What's a fun memory of filming?

Andy's ridiculous. After takes, he blows a trumpet when you nail it. Actually, what's funnier is when you don't get it and you're praying that you get the trumpet. You're on your fifth take and you're like, "Please be the trumpet." That's pretty funny. Also often, he'll sometimes blow it really badly, so it just sounds like a fart.

There was [also] a funny day with the sheep. The sheep got out of their pen and they were on the loose.

Charlotte has a run-in with the local yoofs.

Jack Molloy Legault, Clara Stack and Mikkal Karim Fidler.

Kimberly Guerrero and Taylour Paige (Charlotte).

he's going to do next." Just don't expect to see that familiar face from the outset.

"It's about a build up of tension," Andy explains of the decision to hide It initially. "In a series, it translates to basically not showing the monster in a movie until it's the right time. It's the *Jaws* effect. It's very basic.

"The idea is building tension around the apparition of a monster that we know already, and people are waiting – when is it going to appear? It's very appropriate for a monster that is a shapeshifter to appear in several different shapes and manifestations before he shows up as a clown. So I thought that was fun.

"As a concept it was pretty basic to me that we would delay the apparition of the monster to create that good anxiety and suspense. When it appears, it appears in a big way. I thought it would be very gratifying for the audience to delay that climax."

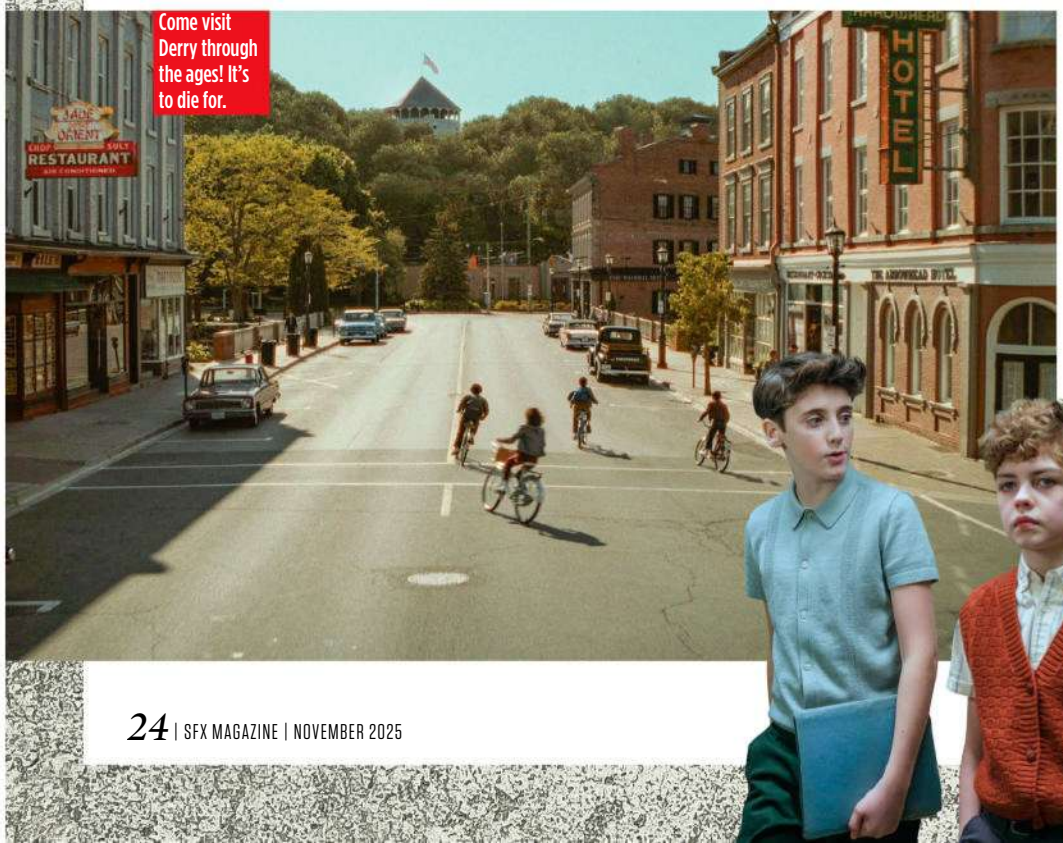
"When you're doing several episodes, you have to make every episode pack a punch, basically," Barbara adds. "That was the hardest balance, to be able to hide Pennywise, but at the same time, create new incarnations and new fears that had a level that could get to a Pennywise level of fear.

"Andy did a truly incredible job at that. We don't see Pennywise for a while, but the things that we see are pretty damn incredible. And there's so much more!"

That "so much more" promises to be pretty scary stuff. "To the studio's credit, we thought, 'Okay, there's stuff we're going to have to fight for.' We're *used* to fighting for the stuff that we want and we had to fight for a lot of things, but not for the shocking moments. They actually supported us and allowed us to do them," Barbara says.

"Now the show is locked, as of today, pretty much. So we've all grown. I've grown as a producer. Andy's grown as a director. We've grown as creators. With that comes continuing pushing boundaries, and you will see the boundaries we pushed are quite intense. I would go as far as saying I think it is the most terrifying content ever made for television. I would say so."

The journey back to Derry took even longer than expected when industry strikes temporarily derailed production. Barbara explains that they "had shot 90% of three episodes" before everything closed down for eight months. "We suddenly had to work in →



Come visit Derry through the ages! It's to die for.

JOVAN ADEPO is LEROY HANLON

What can you tell us about your character?

He's a father. He takes a position that allows him to relocate to Derry with his family. He's someone who actually reminded me a lot of my father just because of the type of man he was.

He can be a bit strict, but really just parenting the way that he was parented. He's a driven individual, ambitious, strong-willed father, and he's just trying to get acclimated to this new town of Derry and trying to raise a family in the '60s.

He seems a very noble and just character...

One of the exercises I was doing was journalling early in pre-production. I actually attempted to draw Captain America, just because this character seems like somebody who's the guy that you think about on the cereal boxes in

Leroy just wants a quiet life for his family...

The Hanlons doing their very best to fit in.

the '60s, who believes in the good old USA, and if you tie up your bootstraps and then you work hard, you can have the great house and the white picket fence, and the happy family, and he's just someone who's willing to work hard for what he wants in life.

And I think it has taken him very far in his life and career. Coming into this town, where it has a bit of its own life and its way of introducing you to the community, I think it's a bit of a challenge for him because he's used to being in control.

Were you aware of the world of *It* or a horror fan before?

Absolutely a horror fan, for one. Secondly, I had seen both of Andy's films, and I had seen the original miniseries. So I was well versed in the *It* world. The book – that's some heavy reading. I kind of skimmed it, but I was very well familiar with the movies – and Stephen King, because I've done other Stephen King projects before. So this was just a really exciting opportunity to get to play somebody who I would consider maybe a cornerstone of one of the families in the Derry history.

What's it like coming face to face with Pennywise?

Yeah, it was interesting [laughs] because I had met Bill a few days before. It was at a dinner that was at Andy's house, so I met him that way, and he's lovely, a lovely guy.

He's one of the hardest-working people in Hollywood, and he knows what he's doing when it comes to the characters that he plays. So to see him in basically how I'm dressed now, and then two days later, see him in costume and he's going through his fittings and things like that, it felt weird because he's such a cool guy to be around normally.

> **"I was very well familiar with the movies – and Stephen King"**

And then you see the final product and it kind of forces you... You're just like, "I know who you are. Good dude, great to talk to. But this is jarring." So it's hard to make eye contact with It because it's such a specific appearance.

What's it like for an actor to walk into an established world?

It was incredibly exciting. I think there was definitely a period in the beginning of our filming where it was just more of a fanning-out type of thing, us going to certain locations that were established in films and seeing the schools and seeing the neighbourhoods.

And that first time in pre-production, where you're seeing the posters that are in the production office and then you might see the balloons and stuff like that. It was just, if you're a fan of the franchise and a fan of the story, really exciting. There was a period where I was like, "Okay, I'm going to enjoy this like a fan while we're doing fittings and stuff like that, but once it's time, I have to put myself in it and just enjoy it from that perspective."

What was the most complicated or demanding element of the series?

Outside of the actor's assignment as far as the drama or playing the stakes of it all, it was quite physical because of the line of work that my character's in. But filming a lot of those sequences and what you'll see in the later episodes, it was quite a physical job for all of us, I think.

But again, you see the world that is built and that you're now included in, and you just want to be someone in the team that's going to contribute, that's going to give it their all every day. We started with that type of foundation in the beginning. You go in and you trust Andy, you trust Barbara, you trust their vision, and you just really ride with that.

So even on the tougher days, the elements got to you. I mean, I was in everything. I was in heat, freezing cold, water, and you know that what they're building is going to look fucking fantastic. So you put your mind on automatic. You just go for it. And it's fun.

Jovan Adepo with Rudy Mancuso (left).

Peter Outerbridge plays the chief of police.

"Need a lift to absolutely anywhere else, please."

different seasons. This is a summer show, but suddenly it wasn't a summer show any more. We had to create a different finale," she laughs, "with a different climate. The kids were growing. Voices were changing. Schedules of actors suddenly became hellish. So it was a huge challenge for the studio as well. Listen, I support the writers and the actors but for the people that were in the process of shooting, it was complicated."

Andy says that everything that people love about the movies is going to be present in the series. "It gets very emotional, it's a very compelling drama. Apart from the horror elements of *It* that are definitely augmented, we're going to have, if I may say it, an enhanced emotional experience at the end of it. We're hoping to get an engagement with the characters that is like no other before.

"It's an augmented emotional experience. You get horror at times 10 because we wanted to raise the bar in that sense. You also get a glimpse into a bigger mythology for people who love the book or love the movies. We're opening a window.

"Everything that we are setting up in season one, that will really manifest in two and three, is a look into all the bigger questions about It. What does It want? Why is It here? All the cryptic elements of It that we're going to ruin and explain," he laughs.

"What I want the audience to feel is that everything they know about It is just the tip of the iceberg and we're going to basically give them a look under the water and show everything.

"It is not only revealing the lives and struggles of people in Derry in the past and their connections with the characters that we know, but also it will be a breach into and towards the other side, the macroverse, the other dimension that Stephen King talks about in so many of his books.

"That line that crosses across so much of his work, which is basically the world on the other side – the Macroverse, the turtle, Gan, the Crimson King and the Dark Tower and the pillars around it.

"So we are going to make a stronger connection with the other side, and hopefully try to make more sense of it."

It: Welcome To Derry is on HBO Max from 26 October and Sky/NOW from 27 October.

Pretty much everything is corrupt in Derry...

CHRIS CHALK is DICK HALLORANN

Your character is established in the world of Stephen King, but what is he bringing to this series?
The thing we do know about Dick from the movie *The Shining* and *Doctor Sleep*, and if anybody's read the books he's actually appeared in, is he has the Shining and that allows him the ability to communicate otherworldly.

So this is how I'll say it: I wonder what that means for someone who exists on another reality and plane as far as Pennywise is concerned. There's not many adults that have anything to do with Pennywise, but can experience Pennywise and I think that they might have some psychic interferences.

Does it help playing a character with previous history?
It's always beneficial to have as much material as possible. It's

Dick Hallorann has many more troubles to face.

tough when I've played people that have either lived or other people have played a different version of, and I have found that it's best to almost ignore them because otherwise I'll steal too much, or I'll try to honour too much.

With Scatman [Crothers, in 1980 film *The Shining*], I was able to take some of his personality characteristics, and we creatively thought, well, where will he be emotionally, physically, before his powers are properly out of control or unlocked?

Other than that, I prefer to read things than see things, because once the creative process starts, I can't promise I'm not stealing, so it's better to not watch.

What's it like being able to build new Stephen King lore?

It's exciting. Imagine getting to build new Stephen King lore, what a privilege. And with Andy, who is obsessed. He's such a visual director. I remember first meeting him going into his office and seeing the imagery that he had *personally* drawn for what he wanted, and I was like, "Yeah, this is going to be great, because this guy has the right kind of mind to play in this world."

What is Dick's arc this season?

Dick comes in with a very clear objective because he is in his own corner, just as every single character comes in, in their own corner. One of the good things about this show is people arrive with their own considerable amount of baggage. Dick's journey is one of, whose life is more valuable than Dick's life? Is anybody's life more valuable than Dick's life? I would say that's one of his questions – can I get the fuck out of here? And what is he willing to do to make that happen and how many people – which from the beginning seems like zero – is he willing to put in front of himself to make that happen?

> **"They treated me like an elder statesman, but I acted like a kid"**

What's it like coming face to face with Bill Skarsgård as Pennywise, if you do?

I did indeed. I will say he's taller than I could have imagined. Truly, I had no idea Bill was so tall. He's a big dude. So when you add all of the make-up... I liked him better out of character than in [laughs].

When he's in the make-up, he's just so focused. He's committed to the job. How many times do you play a thing and still feel fresh and still feel vibrant? I think he's doing an incredible job of that. I enjoyed working with him. He did kick me once, though. We had a row in a scene and I was like, "I don't think he meant to do that..."

What were the sets like?

The things I saw blew. My. Mind. Sixty-foot rain towers, giant 80 by 80 foot greenscreens. They all made fun of me because they treated me like an elder statesman, but I acted like a kid. The whole time, I was like, "Oh my god, look at this. What are we doing? I'm in four feet of water." It was just a lot of really cool set-pieces, and I found it to be one of my favourite jobs. That's a true statement.

What's a standout moment from the series for you?

Well, I'll say this – the last set-piece was very fun, and people will know what that means when they see it, but I can't say what it is. We filmed that for months, which was pretty cool.

Honestly, the enjoyable parts were building it. Playing in four feet of water's fun for 30 minutes, but then eventually, I'm gonna be grumpy...

Do you spend a lot of time in water in this series?

Isn't any time enough? You see the scene, it's three minutes. That means it was two, three days in water. So, yeah, any time you see an actor do a water scene, just be nice to them because it means they were underwater or in water for a *very* long time. But because of the sewers, you know, the sewers of it all, the sewers of Pennywise... [pause] and that's the only water I can talk about!

Does Dick's family know about his ability?

BAD AS GOLD

AN UNOFFICIAL SHORT LETS THE LEPRECHAUN LOOSE AGAIN

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

AS LIONSGATE DECIDES WHERE to take the *Leprechaun* franchise next, Michael Leavy – producer of the *Terrifier* sequels – has dropped his own take online. His short film, "Leprechaun Revenge", serves as a proof of concept for what his team at Fuzz on the Lens Productions could bring to the series if given the chance.

Leavy first encountered the 1993 original as a child. "It really was a franchise that got me to fall in love with movies," he tells *SFX*. In fact, he sees *Leprechaun* as instrumental in shaping the path he and his brother Jason – who co-directed the short – would later take as filmmakers. "We just got what it was going for," he explains. "We have a serious love for both comedy and horror."

The short opens with the Leprechaun paying a visit to the home of legacy character Ozzie Jones, played once again by Mark Holton. Leavy coaxed the actor out of semi-retirement after striking up a friendship at a horror convention. "He said he'd love to be a part of it," Leavy recalls. "I said, 'Look, it's going to be crazy. It's going to be gruelling. We might be putting you through a little more than what you've gone through in past films,' with the prosthetics and the amount of blood – and he'd go through several different phases of make-up, not just one. But he was game. He's such a great sport; he wanted to make this the best that it could be and to have fun with it, to really deliver something for the fans, to give something back."

In "Leprechaun Revenge", the mischievous killer is once again after the gold coin Ozzie swallowed in the original film – despite the character having already been killed off in *Leprechaun Returns* (2018). "It was the only way I felt we could do this without giving away our complete ideas, while still showing tonally what it could be," Leavy explains of choosing to ignore the previous instalment's continuity. "We wanted to do it in a way that was more in line with what I believe the franchise *was*: darker, more grounded in reality, but still with a great sense of humour and horror."

Back in the title role is Linden Porco, star of *Leprechaun Returns*, now sporting a freshly designed costume that harks back to the earlier films. "It was a lot of fun to get him into the Leprechaun," Leavy says, "but this time in a more traditional way, going back to the roots of what Warwick [Davis] and [creator] Mark

STOCK IMAGES: ISTOCK

The titular terror is back in "Leprechaun Revenge".

Co-directors Michael and Jason Leavy convinced Mark Holton to return.

Jones did as opposed to what he did in *Returns*. That was a really fun challenge, and also an exciting thing to do with him."

Clocking in at nine minutes, the glorified fan film climaxes with a suitably outrageous splatter set-piece from the *Terrifier* effects team. "Having the Leprechaun tear through Ozzie's torso and burst out his backside felt completely in tune with the character's warped legacy," Leavy notes.

Though proud of the result, the co-director admits their limited budget imposed compromises. "Obviously with more money, you can get a lot accomplished. We had a few more gags that we wanted to accomplish, but the turnaround was quick because we wanted to get it out there to capitalise on everything that's going on. A lot of it comes down to time – and time is money."

Since its recent debut, the short has attracted nearly 100,000 views on YouTube. "It's been unbelievable," says Leavy of the fan response. "There's been huge support online and a movement that's been hashtagging 'Leavy4Leprechaun,' and Lionsgate.

"It's very rare that you get overwhelming support and positivity, because when you make a movie, whether it's a feature, short, or commercial, obviously everything's subjective. There's going to be some negativity. But the amount of praise that we've gotten has been so overwhelming. It's just really, really cool. It's humbling."

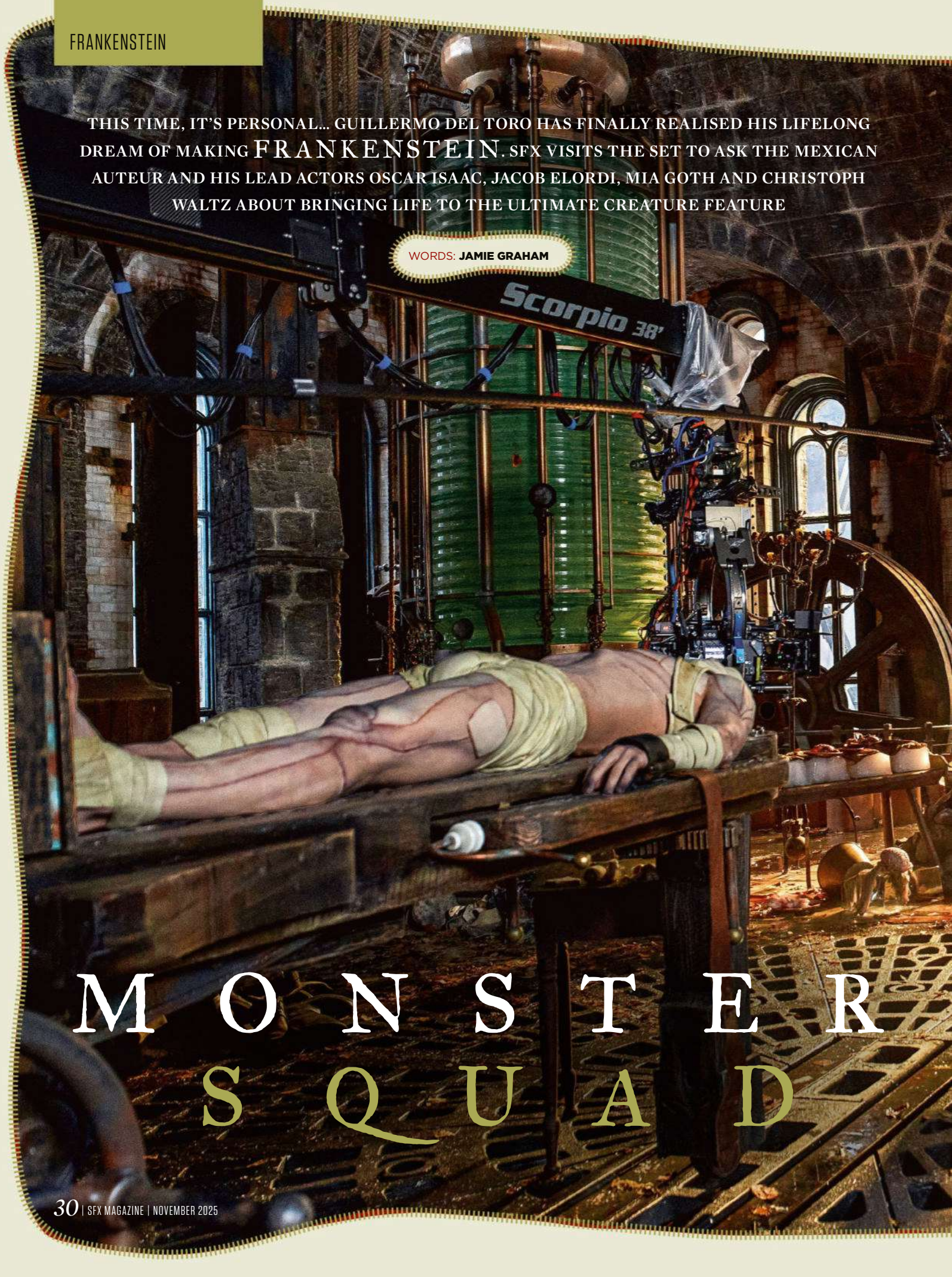
Leavy hints at "murmurs and talks" behind the scenes, and remains hopeful of a call to produce a full-length feature. "We have some great ideas and a few different directions we can go in that I think ultimately will deliver a very satisfying, fun, fresh experience for fans," he says. "We would bring our own flair to it, but keep that same charm that the original had.

"And if nothing comes out of this? We just wanted to give back to the fans who have been following us and appreciating us, and show them, 'Hey, this is where a *Leprechaun* could go if we ever got involved.' Let's just have some fun within entertainment."

In the meantime, Leavy is turning his attention to what be may prove to be Art the Clown's swansong. "It's exciting and it's going to be a really, really fun, big, big film," he teases of *Terrifier 4*.

He's also developing a sequel to his 2024 slasher, *Stream*. "We know where it's going; we know what we want to do," he says. "Just like we took that jump from *Terrifier 1* to *2* to *3*, we're going to be doing that with *Stream*. We're really excited. It's going to be high-octane, very visceral, very fast-paced – a lot of craziness. I'm super excited to bring the script to life."

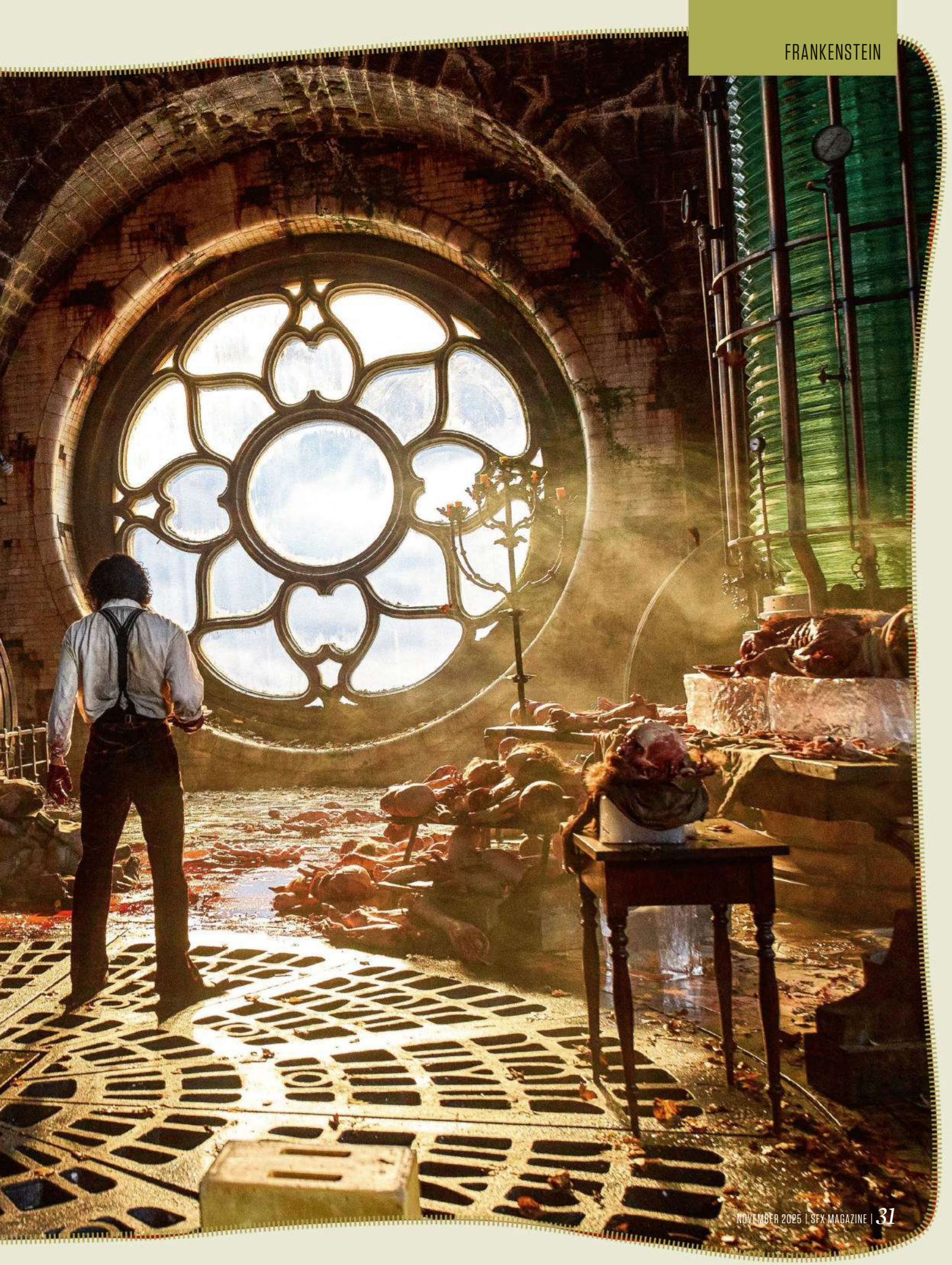
"Leprechaun Revenge" is on YouTube now.



THIS TIME, IT'S PERSONAL... GUILLERMO DEL TORO HAS FINALLY REALISED HIS LIFELONG DREAM OF MAKING FRANKENSTEIN. SFX VISITS THE SET TO ASK THE MEXICAN AUTEUR AND HIS LEAD ACTORS OSCAR ISAAC, JACOB ELORDI, MIA GOTH AND CHRISTOPH WALTZ ABOUT BRINGING LIFE TO THE ULTIMATE CREATURE FEATURE

WORDS: **JAMIE GRAHAM**

MONSTER SQUAD



Oscar Isaac makes the cut as Victor Frankenstein.

CHARLES DANCE IS tucking into a third boiled egg. He's seated at the head of a long dining table in a stately room, the high walls adorned with imposing oil paintings and an eight-foot mirror with a golden frame. Outside it's a blazing morning, but inside the atmosphere is rather dismal, with heavy velvet curtains drawn across the trio of floor-to-ceiling windows. Bewigged servants encircle the table at a respectful distance. They're silent and still, careful not to interrupt Dance's small grunts of joy as he slurps at a spoonful of egg. Likewise, the young boy sat to Dance's right is prudently respectful, eating his own boiled egg with no words and a minimum of movement.

Dance, playing Leopold Frankenstein, tugs at his ear and then inserts a finger for a vigorous wriggle. Perturbed, he works a handkerchief from a pocket and dabs at his ear, his nose. It comes away speckled with blood. Reaching for his water glass, he gulps once, twice, then offers a stern instruction flecked with panic: "Get my medical bag." A servant scurries from the room as Dance goes to stand, but instead slumps forward. The boy seated beside him calmly eats his egg. The only change in his demeanour is the slightest flicker of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

"Call 911! That was pretty goddamn good!" calls Guillermo del Toro from the corner of the room. The Mexican director is dressed all in black and peers at a handheld monitor through thick spectacles. Like everyone else huddled in the corner of the room, *SFX* included, his feet are covered in blue, slip-on shoe bags with elasticated ankles, giving the impression of a team of forensic experts arriving at a crime scene. "Dan?" asks del Toro, and Dan Laustsen, his DoP on *Nightmare Alley*, *The Shape Of Water*, *Crimson Peak* and *Mimic*,

Charles Dance plays the role of Victor's uptight father.

Victor reflects on his rather monstrous actions.

says, "Very nice." To which del Toro responds that they should go again.

Tucking into a fourth boiled egg, Dance repeats his actions. Only this time, the boy – 15-year-old actor Christian Convery (*Sweet Tooth*, *The Monkey*), playing Leopold's son, Victor – incrementally widens his gleaming eyes. "Cut and print!" bellows del Toro, his own eyes shining. "Hahaha! That was great, man!"

CREATURE COMFORT

The location is Wilton House in Salisbury, and the date is 26 September 2024, the penultimate day of a 100-day shoot that began on 12 February in Toronto. But bringing Mary Shelley's 1818 Gothic novel *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus* to the screen began, for del Toro, long before that. Some might point to 2007, when he eulogised a script written by Frank Darabont (*The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Mist*) and floated the idea of casting his regular monster-man of choice, Doug Jones (*Mimic*, *Hellboy*, *Pan's Labyrinth*) as the creature. Others might go back to 1992, when the writer/director made his feature debut with the elegant Spanish-language vampire movie *Cronos*, and first told journalists of his great love for Gothic cinema and literature, namechecking Shelley's novel and James Whale's 1931 film adaptation as favourites. But really you need to go all the way back to del Toro's childhood in the early '70s to discover his journey's beginning.

"I remember more or less the date because my father won the lottery in 1969, and I saw [James Whale's] *Frankenstein* the first or second year we moved into the new house," he says. "So that must have been 1971. I was seven. It was a Sunday, and we went to church in the morning and then we got a bucket of chicken and we sat down in front of the TV and saw horror movies that were always playing on Channel 6. When I saw Boris Karloff [as Frankenstein's creature], to me, it was a religious moment."

More than half a century in the making, del Toro's *Frankenstein* is at last alive, and proves to be a most fascinating creature. At once the most faithful adaptation we've yet seen of Shelley's much-mined novel and a profoundly personal take that switches up relationship dynamics, adds characters and explores new themes, it begins in the Arctic, with the ship of Captain Anderson (Lars Mikkelsen) frozen in ice. As in the book, Anderson and his crew happen upon scientist Victor Frankenstein (Oscar Isaac) and a ferocious monster (Jacob Elordi) in this frozen wasteland and learn of how the two are wedded – creator and creation, father and son.

In this version, set in the 19th century, Victor dedicates his life to discovering the secret of begetting life after losing his mother during the birth of his younger brother, William (played by Rafe Harwood as a child, and Felix Kammerer as an adult). Single-minded in his pursuit, Victor determines to outstrip the successes of his cold, disciplinarian father Leopold Frankenstein (Dance), and is able to survive being ostracised by the medical profession courtesy of benefactor Henrich Harlander (Christoph Waltz).

"My part's not even in the novel," says Waltz when *SFX* sits down with him and the other principal players at the Venice Film Festival. It's 31 August 2025, the morning after the film's world premiere, and 11 months on from our day

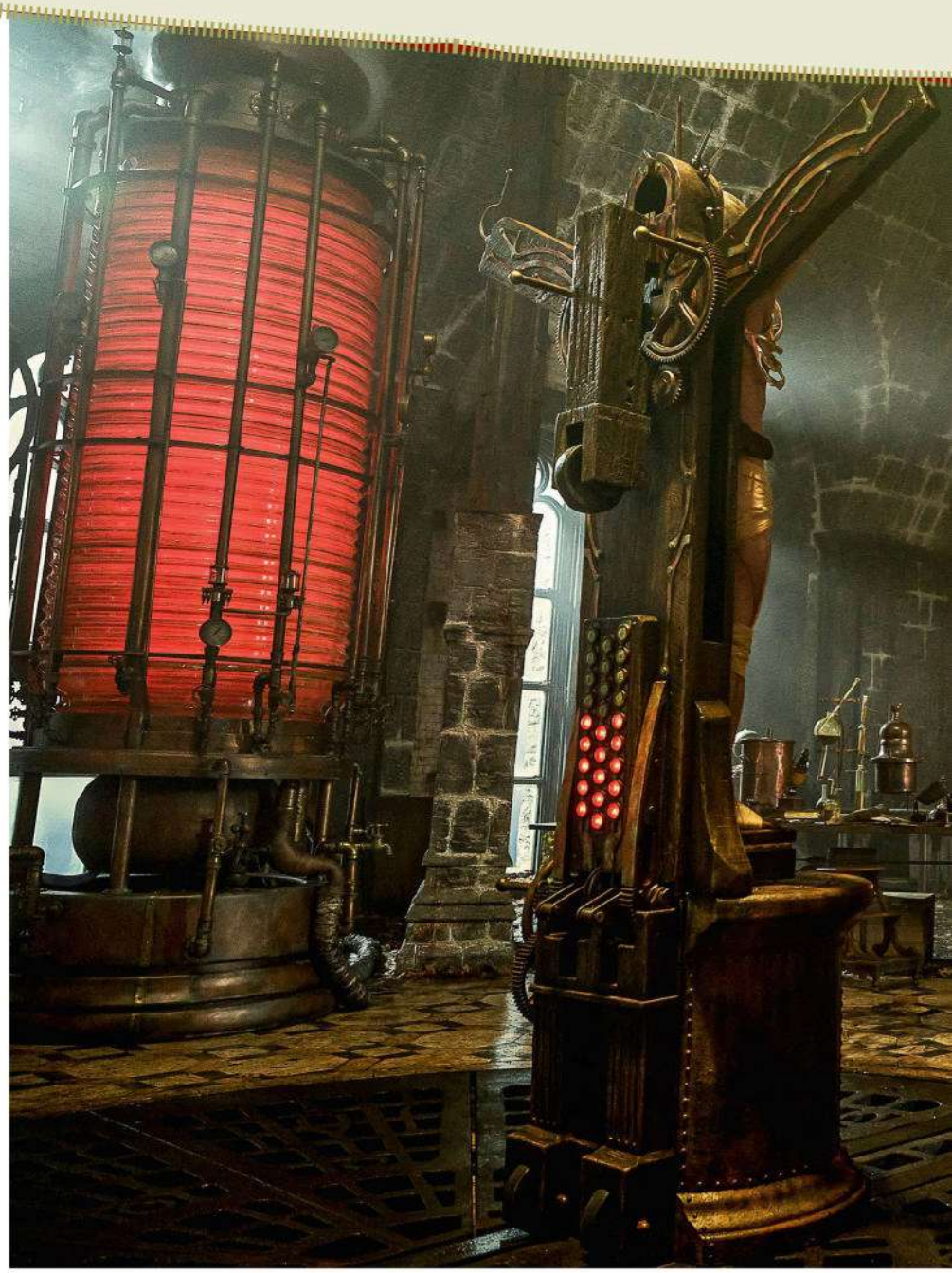
> **"When I saw Boris Karloff as the creature, to me it was a religious moment"**

of boiling sunshine and boiled eggs at Wilton House. "I admired Guillermo's dedication to his version of that novel. He really wanted to extract his very personal relationship to the themes, the topics, the details, the episodes, the characters. So if he thought he needed another one, who would I be to say you don't?"

Isaac nods in agreement, pointing to key changes in his character of Victor. "It was Guillermo's interpretation," he stresses. "He was much more interested in the emotional underpinnings of what the character means to him than the stuff we've seen, which I guess is 'scientist gone mad'. There's elements of that, but we approach it more as an artist. And →

Del Toro directs Isaac in creature creation.

PICTURES: KEN WORONER/NETFLIX



really this idea of generational abuse and trauma that gets passed down, and how he continues to pass that down towards his creation. And ultimately the reckoning that happens because of that."

Del Toro smiles. "I see myself in all the characters, but when I was talking to Oscar, I said, 'He's more of an artist.' We patterned his wardrobe after the New Bohemians in the '60s and '70s, also Mick Jagger, Adam Ant. For the '60s to the '80s, we did the flare-bottomed pants, the high-heeled boots, the wide-brimmed hat. He would be perfectly at home in Soho." His voice becomes wistful. "When Victor's building the creature, I shot it with a beautiful waltz, as opposed to horror music, because he's happy. The creature is almost a sculpture. Many other Frankenstein creatures look like accident victims. They look like they came out of the ICU. I really wanted him to have an almost streamlined, embryonic feel when he's born. Translucent, in ivories and nicotine and soft violets, for the different body parts."

Also altered from the novel is the character of Elizabeth (Mia Goth, again impressing after her triumphant performances in Ti West's *X* trilogy). Here, rather than being Victor's fiancée, she's engaged to his brother, William, and instead of being appalled by the monster she offers it empathy and companionship. Like del Toro's last movie, the Oscar-winning stop-motion animation *Pinocchio*, *Frankenstein* questions what it means to be human, and the scenes that perhaps contain the most humanity of all are between Elizabeth and the scared, shunned creature when she discovers it chained and alone in a dank room beneath the laboratory.

"We filmed those scenes towards the end of our shoot in Toronto, and it was something I was looking forward to the entire shoot because it's this beautiful, important moment in the film," says Goth with widened eyes. "It's the first time the creature is experiencing any kindness or love, or being treated with any gentleness. I tried to not see the creature before shooting those scenes, because I wanted the reaction to be as pure as possible."

"In the novel, Elizabeth is very pious and spotlessly white," says del Toro. "What I wanted was someone with the point of view that everything divine can exist even in things that people bypass or consider ugly. And I made her curious. Victor is fuelled by rage to essentially avenge the death of his mother, and Elizabeth is fuelled by curiosity and faith. She came out of the convent and she sees god everywhere – in the insects and the butterflies. So she encounters the creature without judgement. She is mesmerised by the beauty of the creature."

Elordi, who is not recognisable in the film beneath the prosthetics, speaks with a purity that befits the creature he plays. "This is the point of the text as well: that he's the most human of all of us; the first human; he is absolute humanity."

ACT OF CREATION

Again teaming with make-up maestro Mike Hill (*Nightmare Alley*, *The Shape Of Water*), del Toro worked for many months on the design of his creature – this after many years of fashioning it in his head. How is it possible to create something fresh and impactful given there are more than 400 known feature-film versions of *Frankenstein*, and 250-odd TV versions? And can anything ever again have the cultural impact of Jack Pierce's iconic design in James Whale's magnificent one-two punch of *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride Of Frankenstein* (1935), as modelled by Boris Karloff? Or, for that matter, can anything match the shock factor of the cadaverous, stitched-together creation that Christopher Lee essayed in Hammer's *The Curse Of Frankenstein* (1957),

Elizabeth and her fiancé William (Felix Kammerer).

Christian Convery as Young Victor (front).

Christian imagery is woven into set-pieces.

Mia Goth's Elizabeth is curious and compassionate.

its scars and suppurations presented to horrified viewers in vivid colour? Well, if anyone can, del Toro can.

"Mike and I are both *Frankenstein* freaks," he starts. "This is as much a Mount Everest for him as it is for me. We wanted to present..." For once, he is lost for words, but he soon gathers himself. "For example, the head we patterned after phrenology diagrams from the 1800s, and the body we took an alabaster statue from a flayed saint to give it... it almost looks like a Vesalius anatomical pattern. Very diagrammatic. We streamlined the lines so that you would get a sense of elegance. The material, the silicone, makes a translucency, feeling almost like a foetus or a baby rather than somebody who had been repaired, or somebody who has been built."

Initially, the design was created for Andrew Garfield to play the creature, but the 2024 SAG-AFTRA strikes led to scheduling conflicts and Elordi coming in late. "We worked on the design for a while, and then we did one pass that took six or seven months, and little by little we refined it," says del Toro. "When Jacob came on board, we adapted it to his face and bone structure a little. But we had been playing with it almost a year [before that]."

> **"The head we patterned after phrenology diagrams from the 1800s"**

Think of Frankenstein's monster and you immediately think of its creation in the laboratory. The centrepiece of any *Frankenstein* picture, this set-piece usually unfolds in a fizzing fury as our egotistical scientist plays god by harnessing bolts of lightning from the heavens and conducting the jolts of electricity to reanimate dead tissue. But again, del Toro had an original vision, every bit as thrilling.

"I wanted it to be different to any other," he explains. "First of all, you don't see the construction of the monster on almost any other version. You just see the body bandaged. I wanted to make a minutely anatomical concert of grotesqueries." Put less poetically, we see Frankenstein in all his pulpy pomp as he assembles his patchwork corpse, sawing bones, stitching flesh and fusing nerves. "Then the electric storm sequence, reviving the tissues... I wanted to make it a cross between an opera and a crucifixion," he continues. "The lab set is contrary to other lab sets, [which are] more baroque, full of pipettes and cables and machines. I wanted four batteries and a circular window and →

Costume design took cues from the '60s, '70s and '80s.

The Creature has found something interesting...

Elizabeth ponders the meaning of life. And death.

the face of Medusa, like an opera set. And in the middle of that, a crucifixion. The exciting thing for me is that during that sequence, everything [goes] wrong. Things break down, things fuck up, everything [goes] awry... And things go wrong for Victor from that moment on. So the last time you see him happy is when he's stitching the monster."

For Isaac and Elordi, being involved in del Toro's take on the creation sequence in a *Frankenstein* movie was a lightning-in-a-bottle moment. "It was the most fucking fun I've ever had in my life," grins Isaac, scratching his heavy beard. "Running around in the rain, up and down steps, this Christ-like thing on a crucifix and Guillermo in the corner, screaming! It was hard to fathom that it was actually happening. It's such dark material, but was approached with so much joy. Like 14 year olds had keys to the kingdom – it had that kind of energy to it."

"Limbs, guts, heads, chunks of body... and then bringing the creature up. It really hit me, the *Frankenstein*-ness!" laughs Elordi.

Also on the edges of the creation scene is Victor's patron Harlander, who has his own reasons for investing so heavily in Frankenstein's pursuit. The Oscar-winning Austrian actor behind him says he didn't recoil at seeing Isaac wrestle with slippery body parts. "I'm used to it, I'm from Vienna," Waltz smirks. "We have the first museum of anatomical models, which is from the early 18th century. Guillermo used some of those models as examples for his models. He found an extraordinary sculptor who makes them today, in Paris. It's his absolute fascination and specialty. You should see his house [del Toro's home in Los Angeles, Bleak House, is a sanctuary for his vast collection of props, artefacts, sculptures, models and art]. It's no surprise he comes up with a movie like this."

GOD AND MONSTER

Long-renowned for his love and understanding of monsters – the outsider, the other – del Toro was always going to embrace the creature in his *Frankenstein* movie. In such a creation, he sees himself, as so many of us do. But as a lapsed Catholic who was, remember, in church just before sitting down to a bucket of chicken and Universal monster movies on the most fateful day of his childhood, he sees something else. "To me, personally, the monster is Jesus," he says. "The myth that I was interested in was

A bloody battlefield is a prime spot for body parts.

Sofia Galasso as the girl and David Bradley as the Blind Man.

fathers and sons. Both in a religious way – god sending his son, who is himself, to experience pain – and Victor creating the creature so his sins can be forgiven.

"We reference God, we reference Jesus, we reference Victor's childhood. He's almost Cain and Abel with William. The creature is crucified and has a crown of thorns around him. In the beginning, when Victor starts telling the story, he looks like a saint against a circular window. The creature is given a red mantle to put on his shoulders like Jesus was during the crucifixion... The passage with the blind man [David Bradley] is a passage that talks about forgiveness and expiation of sins. All through the movie there's a very strong Catholic streak because I felt that when you read the book, you basically have an autobiography of Mary Shelley. So I thought, 'What I owe to it is to make it as personal to me as the novel was to her'."

The film is divided into chapters, and the third chapter, titled The Creature's Tale, takes on the monster's viewpoint to fully explore its wounded head and heart. As in Shelley's novel, the monster becomes educated as the tale unfolds, learning to read and articulate, suggesting it might have led a noble life had it not been wounded and warped by continual mistreatment. For Elordi, the creature was a joy to play, allowing the actor to map an entire life, from innocent infant to stroppy teenager to burdened adult, while disappearing beneath prosthetics enabled escape from the heartthrob status bestowed upon him by *Saltburn*.

"In terms of being an actor, the films you're most drawn to are just completely reinventing," he muses. "The beauty of having that make-up on is you go into a little tunnel and you can just see out of it, and people don't see you as you. You get the freedom to become a blank canvas and try and do something different. It's the greatest feeling."

But wait, isn't there also something sexy about this particular monster? As his lumps and bumps settle and his sutures fade, we get to see more and more of Elordi's sculpted 6'5" frame. The scene where he appears in only a snug loincloth was met with much whispering and wriggling in seats at the screening *SFX* attended, suggesting this is the hottest creature since *Flesh For Frankenstein* (1973).

"That was there from the start in the design," says del Toro. "When I was growing up in Mexico, the crucifixion images I saw were both very raw and very sexy. [The creature] has the wound on the side of the chest, which is the wound of Christ. I wanted it to have that religious ecstasy-beauty. I always say, in Mexico, in the crucifixions, Jesus' loincloth is a little too low!"

Del Toro's *Frankenstein* is, ultimately, a film about forgiveness, the director finding the compassion to offer not just the creature a shot at peace come the end credits, but to also excuse Frankenstein for his sins. To watch this scientist/artist build his creation is not dissimilar to viewing del Toro craft his beloved models, and the writer/director knows all too well that obsession can take over. His own all-consuming devotion can be seen in every frame of this handsome film as he orchestrates Laustsen's burnished cinematography, Tamara Deverell's intricate production design and Alexandre Desplat's lyrical score into a vivid opus that straddles genres. Is it a horror movie? A dark fairy tale? Gothic romanticism?

"It's all of the above," he says. "One of the streaks I wanted to bring to the movie was a fairy tale feel. For example, the creature is always guided by the animals. He's guided by the ravens into the valley, then he meets the deer, then he meets the mice, then he meets a wolf... that, to me, was a very good way of the creature facing the world. And there are the Beauty and the Beast echoes that you have between Elizabeth and the creature."

> **"We reference God, we reference Jesus, we reference Victor's childhood"**

He ponders. "I wanted to go back to the early 1800s when Mary Shelley wrote it and she was not worried by what it was. There's a beautiful, undisciplined curiosity to her book. She talks about capitalism, she talks about science, she talks about alchemy. She makes it a melodrama, she makes it a Miltonian, Paradise Lost, oblique thing. She's just hungry. This is how I approached the movie. Yes, it's a horror film, and I have great pride in saying that, but to me it's almost like a family drama."

And now it's done. After 54 years of dreaming, it's out of del Toro and on our screens. And it's left a sizable hole in its creator. "I have a huge post-partum," he sighs. "It's very curious. I discuss it with my family, that it really is remarkable that the phrase that Victor says in the movie, after the creation – 'I was there to mould him; having reached the end of the earth, there is no horizon left, and the achievement felt unnatural' – that's exactly how I feel." His smile is rueful. "I feel a void."

Frankenstein will be in select UK & Ireland cinemas from 17 October and available on Netflix globally from 7 November.

Christopher Lee in *The Curse Of Frankenstein*.

CREATURE FEATURES

RECREATING HAMMER'S ICONIC TAKE ON FRANKENSTEIN'S CREATURE

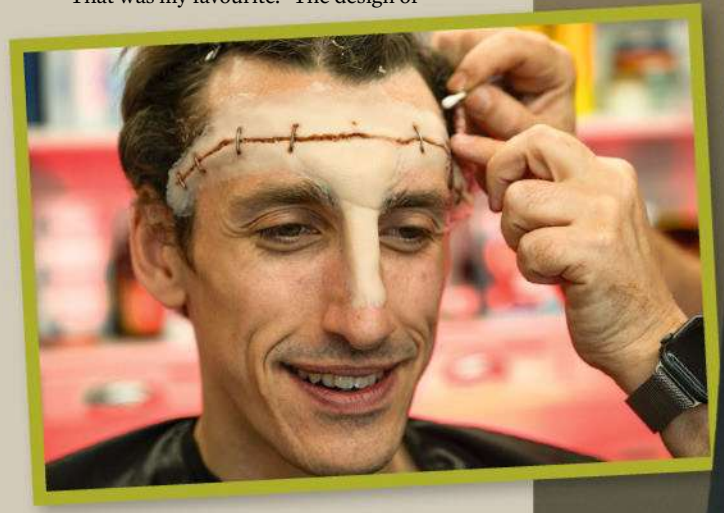
WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

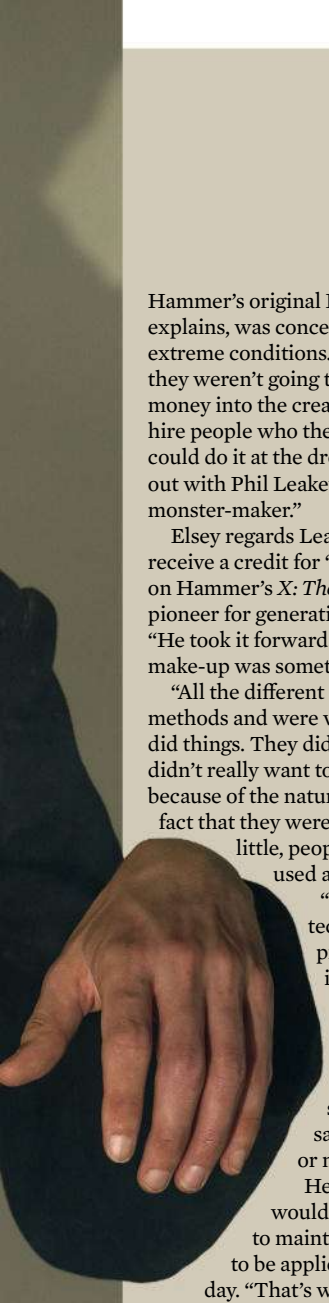
"I HAVE A WALL OF inspiration in our bathroom and on it is *The Curse Of Frankenstein*," says Academy Award-winning special make-up effects artist Dave Elsey. "There's even a picture of it in my kitchen!"

He's speaking to *SFX* about a set of behind-the-scenes photos from the Hammer horror classic – lurching back to life this month in a lavish UHD Collector's Edition box set – that capture Christopher Lee's transformation into the grotesque Frankenstein's monster.

Elsey – whose credits include *The Wolfman* (2010) and *The Substance* – says that making monsters is hard enough, but making *iconic* monsters is another matter entirely.

"And to prove it, there are very few versions of *Frankenstein* that come to mind. You usually think first of Boris Karloff and then, for me, the next in line is Hammer's: Christopher Lee. That was my favourite." The design of





Hammer's original Frankenstein's monster, he explains, was conceived by the studio "under extreme conditions. They realised early on that they weren't going to be able to put a lot of money into the creatures, so they needed to hire people who they felt could do it – and could do it at the drop of a hat. And they lucked out with Phil Leakey. They found their monster-maker."

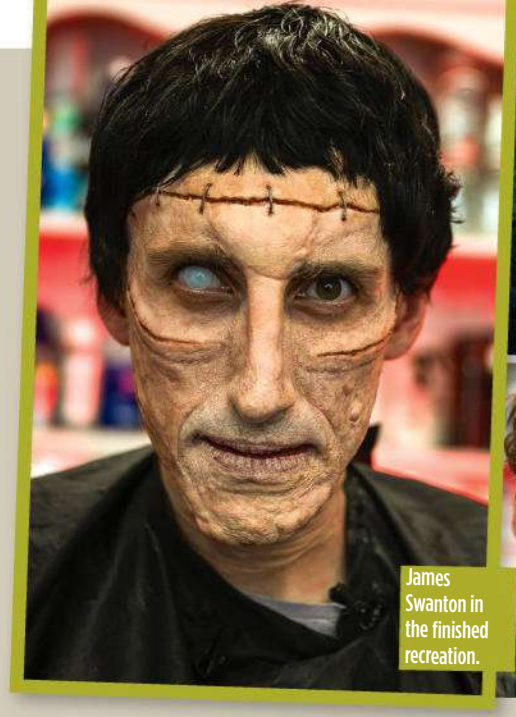
Elsey regards Leakey – the first person to receive a credit for "Special Makeup Effects", on Hammer's *X: The Unknown* (1956) – as a pioneer for generations of artists who followed. "He took it forward. For a very long time, make-up was something quite secretive.

"All the different artists had their own methods and were very protective of how they did things. They did what they did, and they didn't really want to take it much further. But because of the nature of Hammer films and the fact that they were trying to do so much for so little, people like Phil just naturally used all the skills they had.

"Even though many of his techniques were quite primitive, he was very clever in how he approached problems," Elsey continues. "He worked with mortician's wax and theatre-based materials – straight out of the kit, as we say. He had no time to sculpt or mould anything."

He adds that continuity would have been hard for Leakey to maintain when the make-up had to be applied from scratch every single day. "That's why these days we use appliances. We have moulds; we sculpt things so that they come out the same every time. Every skin pore, every pockmark, every bulge and wrinkle is always in exactly the same place."

Released in 1957, *The Curse of Frankenstein* inspired six sequels and paved the way for Hammer's own takes on Dracula, the Mummy, Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and other terrors. "It's really extraordinary that they were able to accomplish the things they did, given the methods, materials, budgets and timescales they were given," Elsey says of the studio's roster of special make-up effects artists.



James Swanton in the finished recreation.

Special make-up effects artist Dave Elsey.

> **"The things they created so quickly – and not easily – are still in our minds today"**

He laughs. "It's funny, I grew up going, 'That's what I want to do. I want to work for Hammer; I'd love to be their main monster maker.' And now I look back and I go, 'Yeah, but not in *those* conditions!'"

In August, the studio invited Elsey to recreate Leakey's make-up on actor James Swanton (*Apartment 7A*). Filmed for the new box set, the process saw Elsey taking a slightly different approach to his predecessor. "I used appliances and silicone make-up – and there was no silicone make-up back then," he explains. Materials aside, his goal was to replicate the original design as closely as possible – flaws and all.

"They are things I'm sure Phil, if he had his time again, would have tried to get rid of," Elsey stresses. "Like, you can see there are ridges around the scars. Those are things that you would usually try to disguise, but the wax just wouldn't allow him to have great edges."

He emphasises that "To do this make-up without showing those edges would be to *not* do that make-up, so I duplicated them, when I could have lost them pretty easily. That's the only way it looked right to me – they're part of the iconic look."

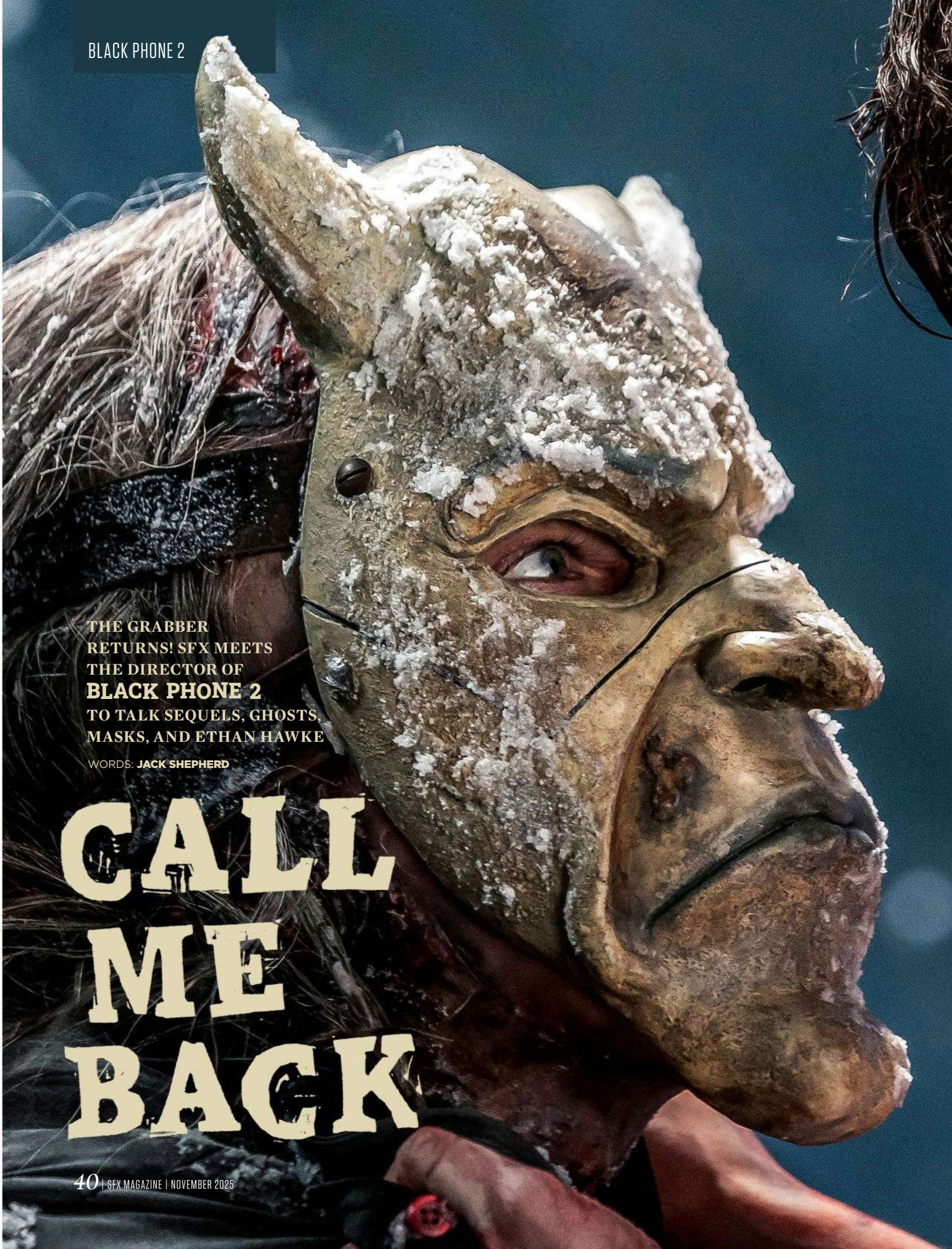
The process took around three hours. "We were talking all the way through, discussing the film, and reliving what it must have been like to have done those make-ups at Bray [Studios]," he recalls.

They even recreated the photos displayed on Elsey's "wall of inspiration" showing Leakey in action. "He definitely influenced me, and I can say that he continues to," Elsey smiles. He reflects on how remarkable it is that Leakey's design still resonates.

"It was strong enough to stick in a lot of minds for a very long time. That's a miracle. That's the enduring legacy. The things they created so quickly – and not necessarily easily – are still in our minds today. The images are still there."

The Curse Of Frankenstein is in cinemas now and on UHD/Blu-ray from 13 October.

PHOTOS: PSYONA WILLIAMS, BETTMANN/GETTY.



THE GRABBER RETURNS! SFX MEETS THE DIRECTOR OF **BLACK PHONE 2** TO TALK SEQUELS, GHOSTS, MASKS, AND ETHAN HAWKE

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

CALL ME BACK

SCOTT DERRICKSON HAS ONLY ever directed one sequel – his direct-to-video debut *Hellraiser V: Inferno* – and for good reason. "A lot of times, for horror sequels, the expectation is a recycled version of the first movie," he tells *SFX*. "I'm usually not that interested in those kinds of sequels, and I'm certainly not interested in making one." It's a mantra the filmmaker had when making *Hellraiser V* (reviews of the movie note how his on-screen nightmare wildly differs from its predecessors), and it's an attitude Derrickson had when approaching his follow-up to *The Black Phone*.

"You're in a perilous position as a writer/director, making a sequel to a movie that has done very well, and in my case, a movie that was very personal," he says. "What eventually got me interested in doing a sequel was seeing how I could build upon the first movie and do something that is not a repeat. It had a lot to do with seeing that I could make a film that's an evolution from the first by waiting until the kids got a couple of years older, and making it a →

high school movie [between ages 14 and 18], as opposed to a middle school movie [between ages 11 and 14]."

TEENAGE KICKS

Based on a short story by Joe Hill, the '80s-set original sees young Finney (Mason Thames) attending school with his sister, Gwen (Madeleine McGraw) when a masked man, nicknamed The Grabber by the newspapers, grabs Finney and traps him in a basement. Hanging on a grubby wall is a disconnected phone, which Finney receives calls on from the spirits of the Grabber's previous victims. The movie climaxes with Finney killing the Grabber, played with terrifying aplomb by Oscar-winner Ethan Hawke. So how exactly is the villain back in the sequel? Well, as the new movie's tagline says, in this supernatural world, dead is just a word.

Derrickson doesn't want to go into the specifics of the Grabber's return. However, we do know that by the time the sequel takes place, Gwen, whose dreams are akin to premonitions of the future, has started having visions of three boys being stalked at a winter camp known as Alpine Lake, and convinces her disturbed brother to help investigate.

"The reason I wanted to do a high school movie was that it has more interesting emotional stakes," Derrickson says. "It requires a different tone than a middle school coming-of-age supernatural movie. You just invariably are going to need to be more violent and more aggressive and maybe more shocking, to escalate aspects of the movie beyond what the first movie did, because a good portion of the audience, the teenagers who grew up really loving *The Black Phone*, they're older now. They're the kids who paid to see *Terrifier*. So there's certainly more intensity and more gore. We were rated R, and one of the things we were rated R for was gore. There's no gore in the first movie at all."

Derrickson was so adamant about the kids being older in *Black Phone 2* that he delayed the sequel somewhat, going off to make the sci-fi romance *The Gorge* while his actors aged up. "I really loved both the characters from the first, I loved the actors, these kids really put their hearts into it," the director says. "It was really interesting reconnecting with them, just seeing who they had become as people. The change that you go through between Middle School and High School may be one of the biggest, most dramatic changes you go through in your lifetime, and I was really interested in who these characters have become, having gone through something so extraordinary. I didn't want to intensify the violence and horror to be more edgy. I was interested in being more mature, going deeper into the emotions of these characters and trying to make a movie that worked as a pair."

As well as going deeper emotionally, the sequel is a dramatically bigger proposition than the original, which was largely contained within a haunted basement. "This one's got a lot more scale and scope to it," Derrickson says. "Technically, it's one of the most complex movies I've made. It was a real technical achievement to get everything on screen that I wanted to get on screen."

For anyone who has followed Derrickson's career, this may come as a surprise, considering he helmed the hugely ambitious *Doctor Strange*, a Marvel extravaganza that incorporated wild, kaleidoscopic visuals. "That's actually the closest movie I can compare it to in my experience of making it," he says. "With *Doctor Strange*, you have such massive financial resources and unlimited visual effects capabilities, but with this, I was doing a lot that was much more ambitious than the first movie, but had real budget constraints. What we did with lenses, film stocks, sound design and score, all of that became so intricately interwoven. And then with some of the bigger set-pieces, especially toward the end, a lot was really hard to pull off on the

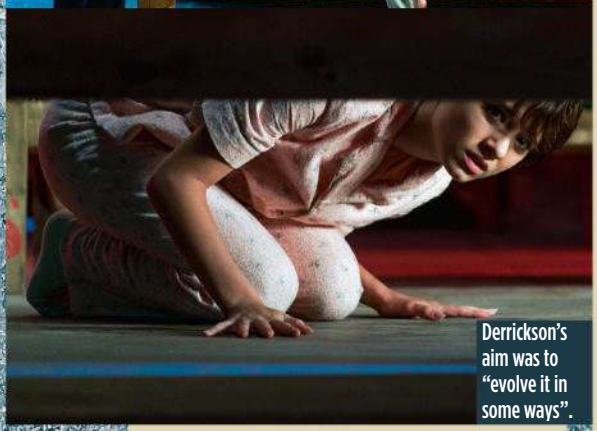
The Grabber is back – now as a vengeful ghost.

It looks like things haven't got any easier for Gwen.

The titular phone retains its power in this sequel.

Mason Thames returns as Finney.

There are clear *Nightmare On Elm Street* vibes on show.



Derrickson's aim was to "evolve it in some ways".

budget we had. It was really, really satisfying that I felt like I got everything I wanted. The movie's 100% the movie I wanted it to be."

Of course, much of *The Black Phone*'s success came down to Derrickson and co-writer C Robert Cargill's decision to transform the Grabber from the short story's overweight kidnapper into a masked, creepy psychopath. "I spent more time working on that mask during pre-production for the first movie than I did on anything else," Derrickson says. The result was an instant horror icon, with the mask adorning the movie's posters, and going on to inform the sequel.

"I was really happy to preserve [its look], but also to evolve it in some ways, and do some different things with it, both in terms of the mask and Ethan himself," Derrickson explains. "It's very much a part of that '80s horror film camp component. It's the *Friday The 13th* mask. It's the Freddy Krueger face. It's the Michael Myers mask. This movie is in the tradition of films like that. And yet, emotionally and dramatically, it's very current, 2025 filmmaking."

ROCKY HORROR

Nightmare On Elm Street was an inspiration, "not so much the first film or the sequels, but the idea of what Freddy Krueger became in pop culture," Derrickson says. "There's one image in the trailer that draws very heavily from an '80s film called *Curtains*." And yet, the filmmaker adds that *Black Phone 2* is not a direct riff on anything that came before, but plays in the subgenre that is '80s camp horror, with Derrickson specifically wanting to make a Rocky Mountain winter camp movie.

"That was the experience I had," he says. "I went to summer camps as a teenager, but I also went to winter camps. There's something really unique about that experience. In the first movie, I was able to capture my experience of being a 12-year-old in 1978 in this working-class area of North Denver. In this one, moving things to this winter camp environment, which owes a lot to '80s horror, and at the same time, it doesn't feel like any '80s horror film you've seen before. As a filmmaker, you want to build upon things, draw upon things from the past, but you don't want to redo things. Having that personal experience in the Rockies, I knew the weather. The weather is frightening, it's menacing and deadly. All of those experiences had a lot to do with my interest in doing the movie, because I felt like there was something unique that I could translate in a cinematic way."

There was only one stumbling block that could have stopped *Black Phone 2* dead in its tracks: Ethan Hawke. "I don't think I would have done the movie if he hadn't been willing to commit to it before I had written the screenplay," Derrickson says. "It was a really courageous thing for him to do; it showed a lot of trust in me, and it enabled me to make creative choices that I otherwise wouldn't have been able to make. Normally, when you write for an actor, you write things in a way that you have to discard them if somebody else ends up playing the role. Like when we were trying to make the Ancient One work in *Doctor Strange*. Every single thing I tried felt stereotypical and wasn't working. When I sat down and tried to write that character for Tilda Swinton, suddenly it came alive. But when I finished, I thought, 'Well, if Tilda doesn't play this role, I have to throw out what I've written, nobody else can say these lines.' With this movie, there are a lot of things that Ethan can pull off, where you can't just hand that over to any other actor. What he does is fantastic."

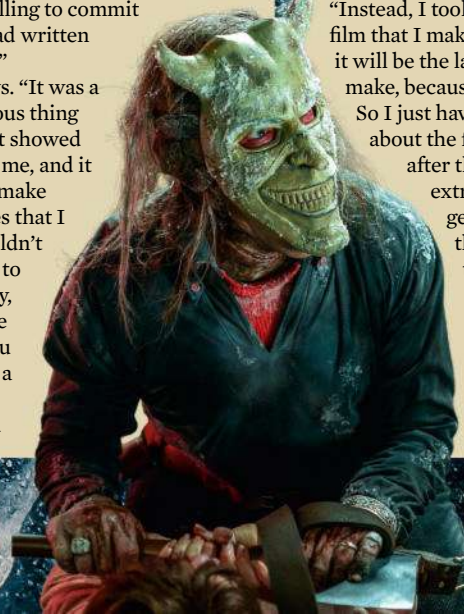
As for what we can expect from the Grabber: "He has a different motive. He's dead. He's the ghost. There's a beautiful, archetypal element in this movie, which is the vengeful ghost. That's present in a childlike way in the first movie, but in this one, it's done in a more potent and powerful way. That's where the fun of the movie is."

Considering some of the comparisons Derrickson has made – and the Grabber's ability to survive death – it's no stretch to imagine *The Black Phone* becoming a stalwart horror franchise. After all, there's already been a spin-off short in the form of "Dreamkill", which is part of the anthology film, *V/H/S/85*.

> **"The teenagers who grew up loving The Black Phone paid to see Terrifier"**

"I made a decision pretty early in my career, when I had my first big filmmaking failure, when I made *The Day The Earth Stood Still* in 2008, that I would never think strategically," Derrickson says. "Instead, I took the attitude of: every film that I make, I make it as though it will be the last movie I ever get to make, because one day it will be. So I just haven't thought much about the franchise of *Black Phone* after this movie. If it does extremely well, I know I'll get a call from the head of the studio, but I'm going to have the same answer that I had after the first movie, which is, 'I'll think about that.'"

Black Phone 2 is in cinemas from 17 October.



PICTURES: ROBIN CYMBALY; SABRINA L'ANTOS/UNIVERSAL PICTURES 'STOCK IMAGES: STEAN CLADWELL/GIORGIOMORARA/GETTY.

STAGE FRIGHTS

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY COMES TO THE WEST END IN A HAUNTING NEW PLAY

WORDS: **WILL SALMON**

Levi and Felix want their audience to experience true fear.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY WAS the horror success story of 2007. Oren Peli's found-footage thriller was shot for just $15,000, but became an instant smash hit, grossing almost $200m at the box office and leading to six cinematic sequels before the franchise petered out with 2021's underwhelming *Paranormal Activity: Next Of Kin*. But ghost stories never truly die... Now *Paranormal Activity* has come shrieking back to life as a stage play. Following a successful first run at Leeds Playhouse earlier this year, the production is now set to haunt London's West End. *SFX* spoke with writer Levi Holloway and director Felix Barrett to find out more...

"It starts with a couple of newlyweds, James and Lou, who have moved from Chicago to London, looking for a fresh start," says Holloway, who also hails from the Windy City. "Things took a dark turn for them in Chicago, but what they discover is that you can't run from your past, and it's not places that are haunted, but people."

Further plot details are not forthcoming, as all involved are keen to keep *Paranormal Activity*'s many surprises as secrets to be discovered by the audience. One thing that is clear, however, is that this is a brand-new tale in the – ahem – *spirit* of the series, rather than a straight adaptation of one of the films.

"The reason why I jumped on it and the thing that first came to my mind was not the film itself initially, but the advertising campaign for it," explains Barrett who, separate to this, is known as the founder of immersive theatre company Punchdrunk. "The trailers for it had a night-vision camera on the audience in a movie theatre all recoiling in their seats. I thought that was so genius – it was less about the film and more the impact that it had on the audience. So that was my North Star, to try and do that to a theatre audience. I want our audiences to feel like they are under threat!"

> "There's a lot of really amazing trickery and magic and smoke and mirrors"

The *Paranormal Activity* movies are, of course, found-footage films – not an easy medium to replicate on stage. "We haven't got rid of it completely," says Barrett, "but I didn't want the gimmickry. The way we've pivoted is to try and replicate the shape, the crescendo, the arc of the film, but not to try and do it beat for beat."

Developing the play "took about a year," says Holloway. "I wrote the script very quickly, but that was on the shoulders of a really healthy period of research and development in London, where I'd keep going back and forth, meeting with Felix and trading great books and great films. We were fascinated with the question, 'Do you believe in ghosts?' It's such a great question because when you ask that, you're really asking, 'What's your relationship with the afterlife? What's your relationship with grief? What's your relationship with god?'"

"We talked a lot about spiritualism," adds Barrett. "Arthur Conan Doyle devoted the end of his life to the pursuit of proving that ghosts are real. Then we looked at some of the stuff that Derren Brown did a decade or so ago. We looked at the classics of the ghost-story genre – Arthur Machen and MR James, those writers who understood what restraint was about." Another inspiration came in the form of Fred Walton's 1979 thriller *When A Stranger Calls*. "That film opens with a babysitter looking after some kids, and she keeps getting phone calls saying, 'Have you checked on the children?' We looked at that because, again, it's about restraint. You don't really see anything, but

PHOTOS © PAMELA RAITH

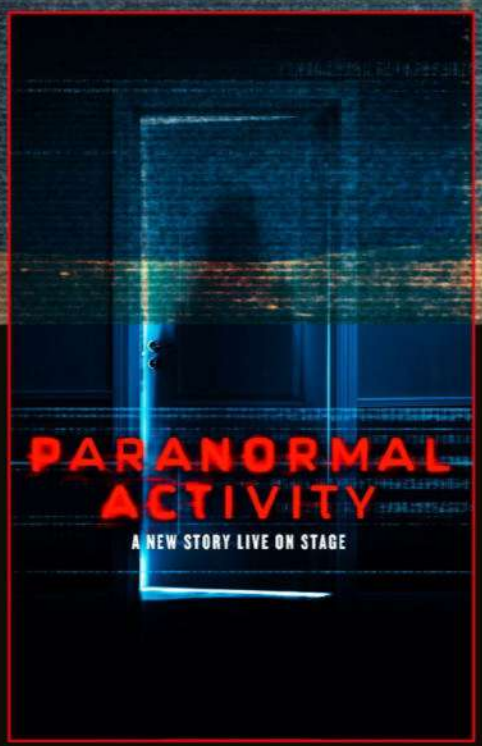
James and Lou try to escape their horrifying past.

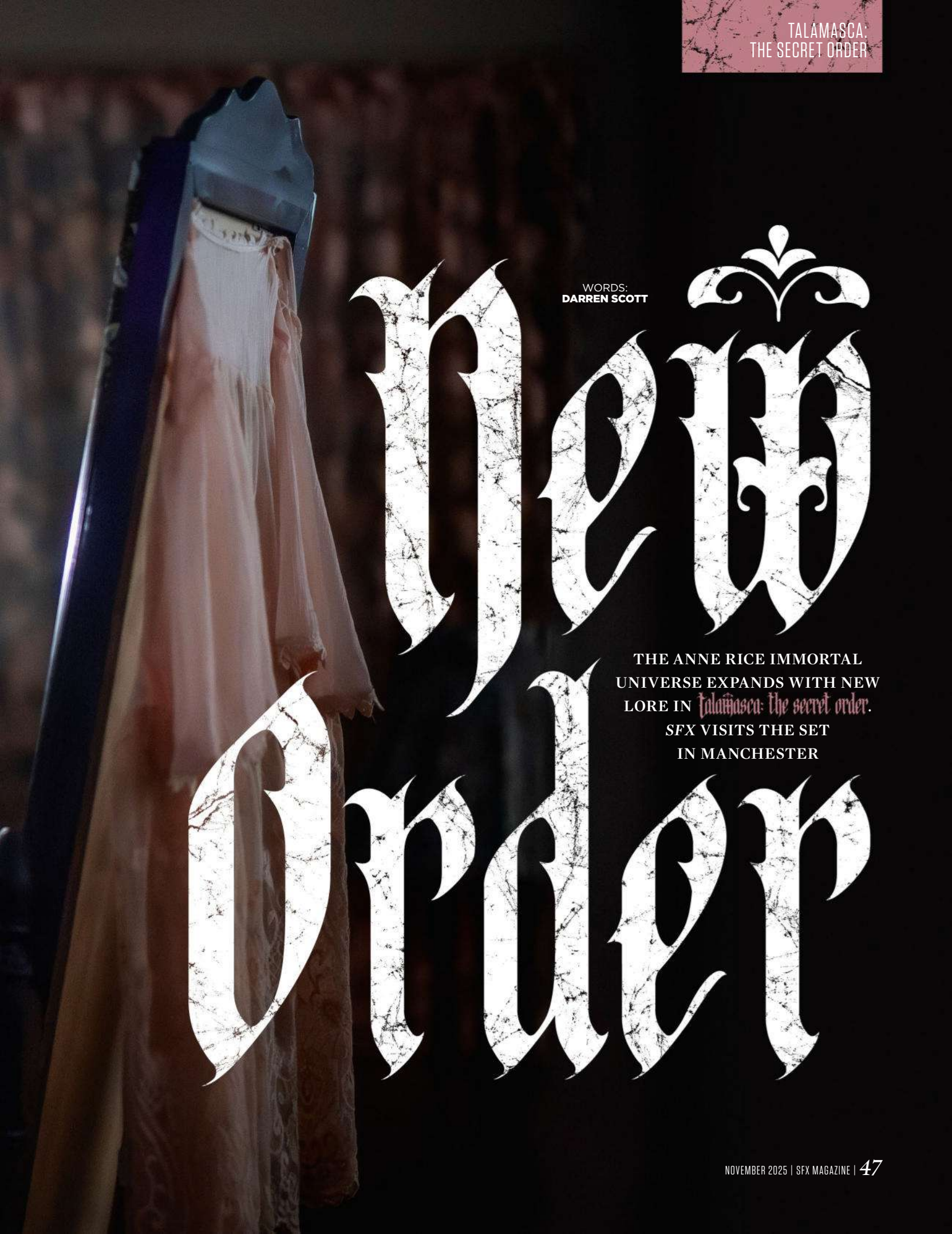
you can imagine being there and the sense of the house itself becoming malevolent."

To help conjure that terrifying feeling in the audience, the team turned to illusionist Chris Fisher, who previously worked on high-profile productions like *Back To The Future*, *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* and *Harry Potter And The Cursed Child*. "He helped us understand what was possible," says Holloway, "because he's not a guy who says 'no'." Holloway also describes the house that the story takes place in as "an incredible piece of work by [set designer] Fly Davis. It's a character in and of itself. That has been reconfigured quite a bit for the West End theatre."

"The presence and how it manifests was such a big question," adds Barrett. "We designed [the play] around that. We did a workshop last year, led by Chris, where we were trying to solve how we could plausibly create the sense of something *other* in the house. There's a lot of really amazing trickery and magic and smoke and mirrors that – hopefully – the audience won't see coming at all."

Paranormal Activity is at London's Ambassadors Theatre from 5 December to 28 February and touring the US from October to March. Visit paranormalonstage.com.





WORDS:
DARREN SCOTT

New Order

THE ANNE RICE IMMORTAL UNIVERSE EXPANDS WITH NEW LORE IN *Talamasca: The Secret Order*. *SFX* VISITS THE SET IN MANCHESTER

Justin Kirk as Raglan James and Nicholas Denton as Guy Anatole.

MONDAY MORNING, AND YOUR intrepid *SFX* reporter is hunched in front of a bottle of lube in a Soho strip bar. It's all in the line of duty, of course.

It's November 2024 and we find ourselves behind the beaded curtain of the very dated Cupid's Error – actually on a studio backlot in Manchester, where AMC has recreated not only a club, but an entire London street.

But nothing is as it really seems with their new chapter in Anne Rice's Immortal Universe. *Talamasca: The Secret Order* is, it turns out, actually a spy show – albeit one with vampires, witches and more.

Creator, writer, director and producer John Lee Hancock explains he was approached by Mark Johnson (*Interview With The Vampire*, *Mayfair Witches*) who asked if he was a fan of Anne Rice, and if he had heard of the Talamasca.

"He said, 'There's no book on it, but here are some mentions that Anne Rice gave it. It seemed to me like a blank slate that you could come up with stuff that you want to do', which was kind of exciting to me. I said, 'Well, it's vampires and witches and that's great, but it's not normally what I do. They'll probably never go for it, but I'd like to do a CIA/MI6 spy show. John le Carré, but we have to have some vampires and stuff in there, then that'll be cool.'"

He laughs. "I'm very surprised. I kept expecting him to go, 'Oh, that's not what we're looking for.'"

Character actor William Fichtner plays Jasper.

Burton (Jason Schwartzman) definitely looks vampy.

VAMPIRE LEGACY

Hancock says he approached it personally. "I'm a person who is not big into the supernatural. I'm not the person who's already purchased the ticket into the vampire tent. I just felt that a grounded person, who does not believe in those things, would be a fun entree and tour guide for others."

Enter our lead Guy Anatole, played by Nicholas Denton. As he's about to graduate from law school he finds himself whisked into the world of the Talamasca – a secret organisation who protect us mere mortals from supernaturals – and discovers they've been shaping his life since childhood. The fragile balance of the human world is at stake...

Writer and director John Lee Hancock (left).

Also starring are Elizabeth McGovern as Talamasca agent Helen, and Jason Schwartzman as vampire Burton. Eric Bogosian and Justin Kirk reprise their roles as Daniel Molloy and Raglan James respectively from *Interview With The Vampire*.

"Nobody ever said, 'Oh, we need to include these from the other shows' at all, never once," Hancock insists of the returning characters. "But I like the idea of potentially cross-pollinating within the tent and where it served us. It also, in some ways, legitimises the entire tent and the entire world, that all these things, all these truths, can exist and coexist."

You'll also be seeing some familiar vampires – albeit with a twist.

"The Revenants are in season two of *Interview*, but they're a different kind of Revenant," Mark Lafferty, joining Hancock as co-showrunner, writer and producer, explains. "I won't go too much into what the difference is here. We're doing a slightly different thing for a variety of reasons that will be clear when you see the episodes..."

Lafferty says they want to "pay homage" to Anne Rice and that they're "very mindful" of the fandom.

"We also want to surprise people and give people something they might not expect or be looking for. We're also confounding your expectations in a certain way, like a good spy show would."

But don't worry too much, Rice purists. "At the end of the day, it's a vampire show. There's vampires, there's people biting necks and sucking blood and there's witches, and there are a host of other things that I won't go into right now."

Lafferty – who cites *The Conversation* as "a big, big touchstone for us" – says they're anchoring themselves within existing rules and lore, but with the Talamasca there's still a lot left unexplored.

> **"We also want to surprise people and give people something they might not expect"**

Reality bites

Nicholas Denton is Guy Anatole

Were you aware of the Immortal Universe?
I didn't know much about it. I did know of the movie, *Interview With The Vampire*, and I'd heard about Anne Rice before, but I didn't know it. Since being a part of it, I'm more and more into what it is, and our little world of the Talamasca is really exciting to me.

What I like about it is that we're creating this expansion of the Immortal Universe through this Talamasca landscape. It feels like we're making more space, in a way, to create, to have more intersections of different characters.

This is all new material. Tell us about Guy...
The Talamasca is touched upon in the other two but this is new and exciting. I play Guy Anatole. He's actually from Detroit, Michigan, but he's been studying in New York, and he's met by this woman, Helen, who tells him that his whole life has been a lie and that everything's been mapped out for him. All of the things that he's achieved have more or less been planned to get to this point, where she now meets him and takes him in, and exposes him to the Talamasca.

So he's, from day dot when we meet him, totally a fish out of water, totally losing it and grasping at straws as to how to make sense of what his reality is. I kept thinking about him and what that would feel like to have your entire life ripped out from under you, and your right as a human to your own future thrown away, and then you've got to make a new world for yourself. That's why I enjoy it.

Has he experienced vampires yet?
Yeah, we've done some of that. That's kind of weird coming to terms with the Immortal Universe for him – is this because he's a sceptic a lot of the time? He's like, is this legitimate, or is he being exposed to a bit of smoke and mirrors here? But there's a lot of stuff that he finds it hard to not justify because it's right in front of him.

How is it acting in a supernatural world?
It feels what John Lee has set up is this reality where this show could play as a spy thriller or as a family drama, or as this very grounded, realistic world. But it just has vampires, it just has witches. It just has ghosts and demons. That's why grounding this in reality was super important, because that makes the best viewing sometimes.

Helen (Elizabeth McGovern) with Guy.

Maisie Richardson-Sellers plays Olive.

"We were at a place where we were free to invent and push the boundaries of what the organisation is and who they are and what they do, and make up our own world and set the parameters for it.

"This was unconventional for that genre, and yet it made a lot of sense, because when you really start to dig into it, the conventions of the spy genre and the conventions of the vampire genre, while they don't seem to have a lot in common, they're populated by loners. They're populated by people who are looking for connection, who are seeking answers.

"It's actually really freeing in the sense that there's only so much to go on; you just start to extrapolate in the ways in which you feel would be most interesting and successful to tell a good story.

"At a certain point, both John Lee and I decided that we didn't want to become oversaturated with source material, because we wanted to allow ourselves the freedom to really go in a direction that felt most natural and organic to us, and to the show."

Daniel from *Interview With The Vampire* returns.

Filming moves from the studios to location – this time Victoria Baths, an old Edwardian swimming facility. The pool is empty but the corridors are bustling with crew. On the first floor they've set up production.

The director shouts action on scene 39B, take one. "Whatever they were looking for, I don't think I had much of it," Helen says as Guy walks behind her. "Eventually they sent me to the States. Cambridge, Massachusetts. My uncle took me in. I was only here a couple of years, others stayed much longer."

"This is an old Talamasca facility that we're in, and one of our characters is experiencing a little bit of a trip down memory lane," Lafferty explains. "She's revisiting a place that she was in in her youth, and it's now in a state of total disrepair, and as she tasks Guy with what he's to do going forward, she's also looking into her own past."

They'll be shooting up from inside the empty pool, catching the characters sitting on the bleachers. It's one of six scenes they'll be capturing in this particular location.

"It's supposed to feel like a rundown, decrepit old institution," Lafferty says, but notes that actually it's been kept in such good condition that they've had to rough it up, and will also add visual effects.

He says there's been a lot of location filming, "much more so than most equivalent series we've done. Mostly it's because of what Manchester has afforded us. When you walk into a place like this, it's just gift-wrapped for you."

Production began on season one in August, wrapping in February 2025. But what of the future? "I'm just trying to not get fired before the end of the first season," Hancock jokes.

"It's designed to be an ongoing series," Lafferty adds, "so we have talked a lot about what season two, three and four would look like. We have *nothing* set in stone yet, but the design of the last few episodes is to set up a second season."

Talamasca: The Secret Order is on AMC from 26 October, UK release TBC.

JASON'S ALIVE... AGAIN!

FRIDAY THE 13TH'S KILLER FINALLY RETURNS AS PART OF JASON UNIVERSE

WORDS: **DANIEL KRUPA**

IT'S HARD TO KILL MONSTERS. STAB them, burn them, hack them to mush, and they come back. Throw them into a lake, shackled to rocks, and even then they might still return. Heck, even decapitation isn't a reliable method nowadays.

Jason Voorhees knows this better than most. In fact, the only thing that has kept this beloved revenant from the big screen in the last 16 years has been that most effective of hexes: legal issues.

For almost two decades, the character has been mired in a series of legal disputes that have prevented major new instalments from breaking ground. But under the new stewardship of Horror, Inc, and the ambitious banner of Jason Universe, the beloved hockey-masked killer is returning with the serious intent to make up for lost time.

Robbie Barsamian and Sheri Conn, the Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer of Horror, Inc – the house where Jason now resides – spoke to *SFX* about their extensive plans for Jason's return across a wide variety of media.

"Jason is the most iconic horror villain of all time," believes Barsamian. "He set a standard for the type of fear and kills audiences have come to expect of the last 45 years."

It's a big claim, and while fans of other masked killers might disagree, Jason is certainly in the conversation. Since launching Jason Universe, Barsamian and the Horror, Inc team have spent considerable time surveying his various incarnations, sifting out what is essential to the character, and trying to divine what made the *Friday The 13th* series so popular.

"The franchise is a terrifying, yet fun, thrill ride," says Barsamian. "Jason wasn't born evil. He has a backstory that sets the stage for the deep-rooted anger and blood-soaked reactions we see on screen, making him the anti-hero all of us are anxiously rooting for."

Jason is an imposing yet sympathetic figure – after all, he is the first victim in the story of *Friday The 13th*. Although not depicted onscreen, Jason drowned as a child because the teenagers entrusted with his care at Camp Crystal Lake were too busy making love to notice his cries of distress. Somebody should've been watching him. After all, he was a very special boy.

He has motivation. Compare this with the blank face of Michael Myers in *Halloween*, who kills without discernible motivation. (Well, at least in the first film.) We revel in Jason's brutal execution of horny teenagers, shirking responsibility like those who came before them. But throughout all these horrors, the tone of the series remains notably less serious, less intense than some of its peers: these films were also intended to be fun, too.

But who is Jason Voorhees after 45 years, 12 films, and 201 kills, give or take? (This number does rise to around 24,824 if we count the →

Scenes from "Sweet Revenge", on YouTube now.

Jason 2025: you've still got time for Halloween.

crew of the Solaris in *Jason X*, as well as animals and holograms.) This is the question facing any franchise returning after so long. What elements do you take from all those iterations? What does Jason look like today?

"The original film hooked fans with the boundary-breaking shock-and-awe of the kills, delivering more of what fans wanted to see from Jason with each movie," says Barsamian. "He's a strong, towering figure who lives in the woods, silently stalks his victims, and kills with practical weapons... He's the slasher who never stays down for long."

It's clear there's been a period of reflection, where the entirety of Jason's bloody oeuvre has been considered. They've identified both the pathos and physicality of the character as core elements, as well as his indestructibility. But there's a tonal continuity they're also reaching for. "We're recapturing the vibe of the '80s films to reconnect with our roots. They're a cornerstone of the franchise."

This is evident in "Sweet Revenge", a 13-minute thriller made to reintroduce Jason to audiences in the year of his 45th anniversary. Directed by Mike P Nelson – responsible for 2021's *Wrong Turn* and the incredibly tense segment "No Wake" in *V/H/S 85*, which aptly takes place on a lake – "Sweet Revenge" does a brilliant job of modernising many of those core elements.

Although brief, it has all the archetypes and tropes you would expect but deployed within a fresh contemporary setting. This is Crystal Lake on a scale and level of production we haven't really seen before. Another core element it has a lot of fun with is the spectacular nature of Jason's violence – one kill featuring a boat motor is particularly memorable.

But that's the thing about Jason: despite once wearing a hessian sack over his head for an entire movie, Voorhees possesses a certain sense of style. Thanks to some pioneering work by make-up legend Tom Savini in the 1980 original, the series became known for its gory and inventive kills, with each instalment trying to outdo the last. This has led to hearts being ripped from chests and heads being punched clean off someone's body.

In recent years, mainstream horror has been more comfortable exploring the psychological dimensions of the genre – a refined space, ill-suited to the bloody delights of *Friday The 13th* – but it feels like the times are changing, and as with all fashion, what has fallen out of favour has a tendency to return.

Much like the '80s – the decade that birthed Jason – gore may once again be back in vogue, a shift heralded by the unexpected success of the *Terrifier* franchise and the resurgence in body horror hits, such as *The Substance* and *Together*. Audiences may have just rediscovered their blood-thirst at the right time. Sheri Conn, Horror, Inc's Chief Marketing Officer, definitely recognises this as another key ingredient in their recipe.

"Yes, gore is essential to Jason and the legacy of the franchise," she says. "We're committed to delivering the iconic bone-crushing kills fans know and love – while reimagining them with fresh twists, like the boat motor kill in 'Sweet Revenge'. At the same time, we're creating bold new moments designed to become instant classics of their own."

FACE OFF

That weaving together of the familiar and the new can be seen in the new "design" for Jason by horror effects legend and director Greg Nicotero, also a protege of Tom Savini. But in many ways, Nicotero's Jason isn't a new design at all but a thoughtful distillation of Jason Voorhees – what he'd look like as if drawn from memory, rather than from a particular film.

His Jason is the platonic ideal of a Jason Voorhees – massive, looming, dishevelled, freshly emerged from the woods, wielding his preferred weapon, a rusted machete. It's the Jason of both your dreams and nightmares.

STOCK ART: FARBAKOLEROVA/GETTY

Fancy getting menaced by Jason yourself...?

Then you'll need to visit Halloween Horror Nights.

"Jason's had a number of looks across each of the 12 films," says Conn. "So we wanted to pull inspiration from a few of the most iconic... We reimagined the eyes on his mask to make Jason look even more menacing and paid homage to the franchise with the 13 holes in the mask."

The design debuted independently of any specific project but has since appeared in "Sweet Revenge", and can be seen up close in the Jason Universe house currently running at Halloween Horror Nights, the annual Halloween event hosted in Universal Studios theme parks. Although this is the official look for Jason, it appears that future filmmakers and creatives will still have some latitude to alter the design – it's best to think of this incarnation as the "house style" Jason.

"The new design will be used across the board, with some slight differences in interpretation to fit the specific context of each project," explains Conn. "Fans can see this version of Jason now and through to the end of the year in 'Sweet Revenge', at Universal's Halloween Horror Nights experiences in Hollywood and Orlando, Spirit Halloween costumes, Funko and YouTooz collectibles, gaming collaborations, and more."

That gives an indication of the full extent of Horror, Inc's plans. Jason isn't a character solely bound to film; he'll be everywhere.

So what lies ahead for our special boy? The prestige TV show *Crystal Lake* is currently in production in New Jersey – the home of the original Crystal Lake location – with Linda Cardellini as Pamela Voorhees. Overseen by A24, the series was due to be released this year but the 2023 writers' strike and changes in creatives have pushed the show back. (*Hannibal*'s Bryan Fuller was originally appointed as showrunner before leaving the project in 2024.) No release date has currently been set, but next year seems likely.

Naturally, a new movie seems high on the list of priorities, but all Barsamian is willing to say right now is that "we are actively working on a new movie – which will be the 13th in the franchise – as well as a new videogame" and that "he will return in other unexpected ways..."

For long-time fans of any series, a legacy sequel – let alone the full-bodied, multimedia resurrection being plotted here – presents niggling questions about continuity. Did everything in the past still take place or are we starting again from scratch?

Fans might look at Nicotero's hockey mask and notice there's no gash where Chris lodged an axe into Jason's head in *Part III*. (Yes, we realise it's hard to table observations like this without sounding like a deranged Redditor.)

> **"We reimagined the eyes on his mask to make Jason look even more menacing"**

When asked about continuity, Barsamian responds with Horror, Inc's ethos rather than a definite answer. "We're exploring a variety of opportunities, but consistently staying focused on authenticity."

And that's probably the way to go. With any long-running series, there's plenty that's worth forgetting. If the past prevents creation it's maybe worth leaving it behind. Taking a malleable approach to your continuity is probably the best approach: it gives you the freedom to be bold, and take risks, which is even more useful when you remember Barsamian isn't just talking about a new film, but an all-out Jason assault on multiple fronts for years to come.

Jason Universe is the moniker uniting all these varied projects, a reminder it isn't just another sequel but a violent reassertion of Jason's place within our popular culture.

"Sweet Revenge" is on YouTube. Visit jasonuniverse.com

CREEPY COMICS

FROM SUPERNATURAL TO STRANGE TALES AND JUDGE DEATH, THIS YEAR'S SPOOKY SEASON COMICS ARE SCARIER THAN EVER

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

BAD GIRLS

These comedy horror queens have got their knockers, but we're delighted to see the pair of them

As the host of '80s TV series *Movie Macabre With Elvira*, the Mistress of the Dark is the perfect candidate to usher in this spooky season's offering of scary comics. She's teaming up with DC Comics' own Maid of Mischief Harley Quinn in a new six-parter from Dynamite Entertainment, *Harley Quinn X Elvira*. It's co-written by long-running *Harley* scripters Jimmy Palmiotti and Amanda Conner, with the latter sharing art duties with Juan Samu.

"Elvira and Harley are quite different in many ways," says Palmiotti. "Harley is driven by her instincts and emotions the minute they pop into her overworking brain, and reacts a bit too quickly to just about everything.

"Whereas Elvira is hyper-aware of herself and how she wants people to see her, and looks at things from a point of view that comes from experience and a side dish of humour. Harley is more spontaneous than Elvira, and that gets her in more trouble than both of them can handle."

With Elvira's show threatened by a corporate takeover, she joins with Harley to throw a huge Halloween party. "We kick off in Harley's Coney Island stomping ground and we also step into Elvira's world," continues Palmiotti. "Think coast-to-coast TV stations, late night horror hosting and a reality that's just grounded enough for the two characters to meet. By issue three, we swing by some of Elvira's old haunts and stir up a little mischief on the other side of the globe."

Dynamite Entertainment is also bringing *Supernatural*, which ran for 15 seasons from 2005 to 2020, back to comics. The new series is by writer Greg Pak and artist Eder Messias, and focuses on the Winchester brothers' more accessible early adventures.

"The show gets into incredibly fun but also pretty complicated mythology and demonology in later seasons that might be a lot for new readers to wrap their heads around," explains Pak, whose stories are set immediately after the conclusion of season one. "So it felt like a great move to start the comic series during the kind of monster-of-the-week era."

With Dean more impulsive and action-orientated than the more thoughtful Sam, Pak is enjoying exploring the siblings' contrasting personalities. "When you have characters this well matched – or mismatched as the case may be – every single scene can be about more than what the scene's about," he says. "There's always a little character development that can happen at any moment."

Pak is also building a greater narrative. "There's a new villain that'll turn out to have a lot more going on than might be evident," he teases.

Harley Quinn X Elvira and Supernatural are out now.

Covers for *Harley Quinn X Elvira* and *Supernatural*.

LINSNER
2025

DO NOT ADJUST YOUR (COMIC) SETS

Dawn of IDW Dark

Evolving organically out of popular titles like *30 Days Of Night* and *Locke & Key*, IDW's new horror imprint IDW Dark balances original books such as anthropomorphic serial killer series *Beneath The Trees Where Nobody Sees* with licensed properties like *Event Horizon*, *The Twilight Zone* and the forthcoming *Smile*.

"As a genre, horror is so rich and diverse," says group editor Heather Antos. "It's not just about jump scares or monsters; it's about mood, psychology, cultural fears and storytelling experimentation. Books like *Beneath The Trees* have a very different feel to *A Quiet Place* or *Event Horizon*.

"But that's the beauty of it – under the IDW Dark banner umbrella, fans can expect variety. From slashers to supernatural thrillers to atmospheric psychological tales, we want to showcase the full spectrum of horror."

According to Ellen Boener – who edits the new *Twilight Zone* miniseries alongside Nic Niño – IDW has taken a gentler approach with the five-parter, which recreates the vintage feel of the classic '60s television series.

"Its standalone stories have timeless appeal to fans who might not need a side of bloody guts with their psychological thrills," she says. With the exception of issue one's Dan Watters and Morgan Beem, writer/artists have been recruited to solely script and illustrate each issue.

"Tom Scioli takes you to space in issue two in a story that infuses all the retro-futuristic elements and fun monsters you'd expect from him," continues Niño. "Then in issue three James Stokoe delivers the most action-packed *Twilight Zone* story ever."

"James takes a concept and weaves it into an entire world history you can't wait to unravel," adds Boener. "Then in issue four, Nate Powell brings us an emotionally charged issue about a family struggle that's elevated by his haunting sequentials."

Along with connecting covers for each issue, Francesco Francavilla also takes on issue five.

"Each of his covers is a reference to a different opening sequence from the show and is chock-full of *Twilight Zone* icons," teases Boener. "We've crafted these stories to feel as if they were episodes of the original TV show with their use of an omniscient narrator, black and white art, the trade dress fonts and retro-futuristic setting designs.

"The stories themselves are completely new. They tell tales of billionaires, scientists, families and knights as they journey to island paradises, bitter battlefields and the farthest reaches of outer space."

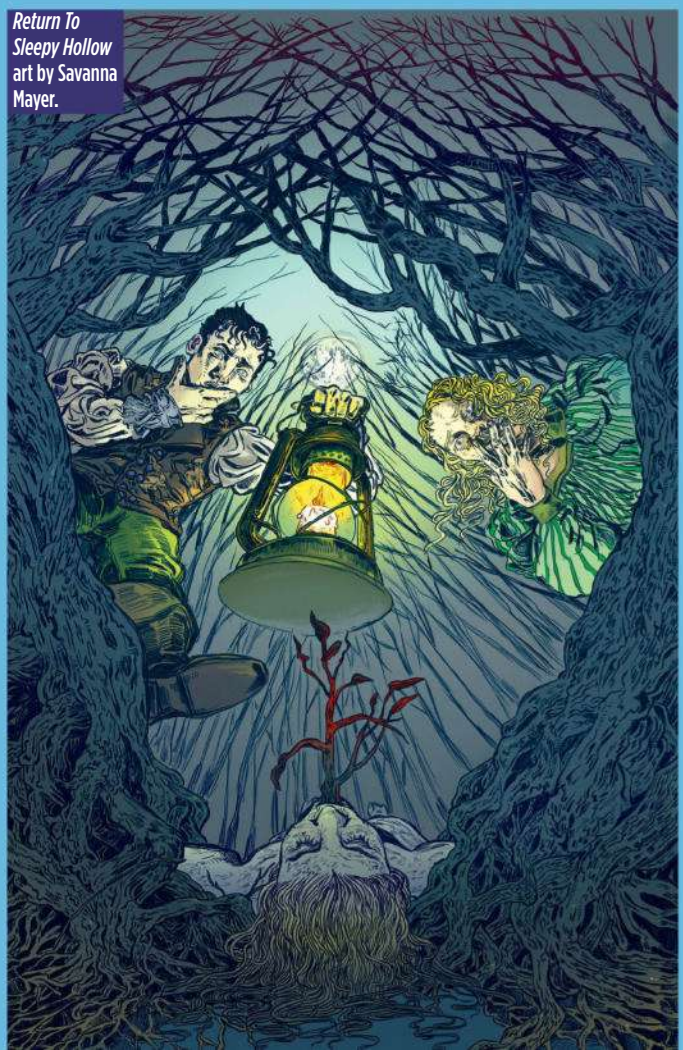
Based on Tim Burton's 1999 film rather than Washington Irving's 1820 short story, Casey Gilly and Savanna Mayer's *Return To Sleepy Hollow* occurs 15 years after the original *Sleepy Hollow*. Ichabod Crane returns to the Upstate New York village to investigate another mystery, which again challenges his occult-sceptical views.

"Even though he saw horrifying supernatural events during his first tenure in the town, it seemed natural to me that he'd return to his comfort zone," says Gilly. "But he's also smarter, more worldly and more emotionally realised than he was 15 years ago."

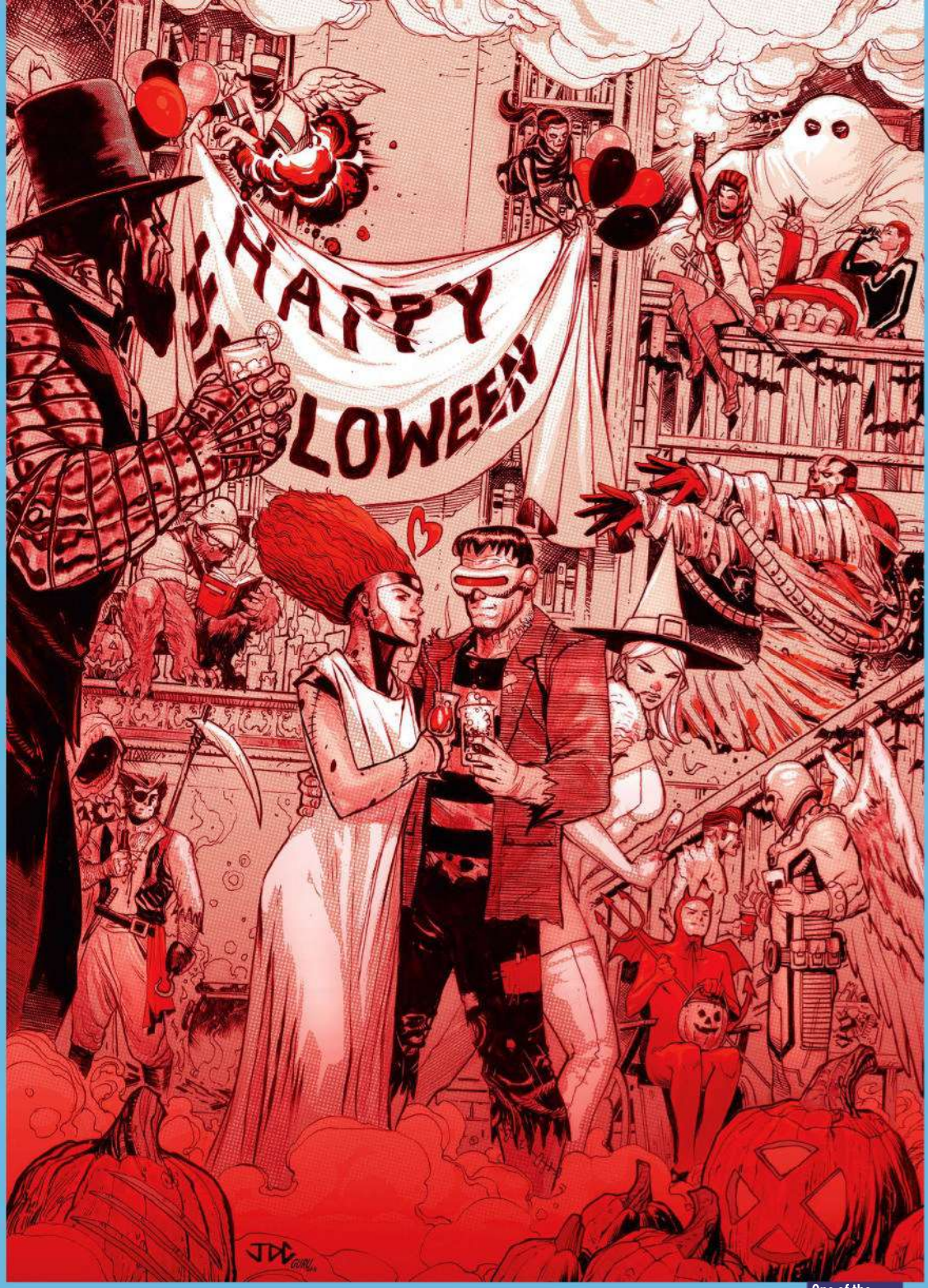
According to Gilly, "things have definitely changed but in ways that make sense for the town and the characters," and Mayer was interested in the historical progression from a colonial era to the Regency period. "That affected the fashion, which is my favourite mode of narrative storytelling," they explain.

The Twilight Zone is out now. Return To Sleepy Hollow is out on 29 October.

Twilight Zone art by Francesco Francavilla.



Return To Sleepy Hollow art by Savanna Mayer.



One of the covers for *Black, White & Blood & Guts*.

STRANGE DAYS

Witchcraft and Walkers front Marvel's Halloween offerings

While the Sorcerer Supreme "is not our central character", Marvel's new *Strange Tales* miniseries fits very much within the realm of both Doctor Strange and "the strange", according to writer Jeremy Whitley. Working with artist Bayleigh Underwood, he's assembled a diverse band of mystical and non-mystical characters that also includes Scarlet Witch, Gwen Stacy's Ghost Spider and the coupled-up Teddy Altman and Billy Kaplan and Nico Minoru and Karolina Dean – late of *Young Avengers* and *Runaways* respectively.

"This is less about a team of folks despatched to deal with a problem and more a group thrown together by a threat and doing their best to save the world," says Whitley. "We wanted to reach across the generations of Marvel characters and bring together widely known characters like Doctor Strange and Scarlet Witch with popular characters from younger generations like Nico, Billy and Gwen.

"The source of the threat in this story is mysterious, but it's definitely something big."

Since "they're both missing some of the people that are most important to them in the universe", the four-parter opens on Halloween with a roleplaying game going awry, leading Wanda and Nico to discover they have much in common as Billy and Karolina go missing.

"I've always loved stories where a menace from mythological fiction comes to the real world, and that's exactly what Wanda and Nico are dealing with," says Whitley. "While it may seem like something they've never faced before, looks can be deceiving. We wanted to pull together both the world of RPGs and the world of classic Marvel to tell a story with the best of both worlds."

As the latest in Marvel's mostly monochrome anthologies, new miniseries *Black, White & Blood & Guts* has a visceral quality hat particularly suits its ex-*2000 AD* creators, including the likes of Al Ewing, Kev Walker and Garth Ennis.

"The strengths of the format are always the first place my mind goes to, and if a story is black and white except for one red element, that immediately demands a certain degree of thought and care," says Ewing, who teams up with Walker on *Blade* in issue one. "This time I had the idea of a red line running through the story – a metaphorical blood trail that Blade follows to solve a case from his past."

"The strength for me as an artist is that I get to be creative with the colour," adds Walker, "rather than just the line."

Garth Ennis's contribution is a sequel to his Daredevil story for 2023's *Marvel Zombies: Black, White & Blood*. "I particularly enjoyed the involvement of the admittedly not very mysterious stranger," he says, referring to the Punisher. This follow-up also features the Hulk and the Thing.

Strange Tales and Black, White & Blood & Guts are out on 8 October.

JUDGEMENT DAY

Judge Death comes a knockin'

With the character having debuted in 1980's *2000 AD* Prog 149, the comic is marking the 45th anniversary of Judge Dredd's undead counterpart with the *Judge Death Mega Special 2025*. This highlights not only the former Sydney De'Ath but also his three fellow Dark Judges, with Lauren Beukes and Tazio Bettin taking on the main man himself.

"In Judge Death and the Dark Judges' early appearances there were references to a statue commemorating the last living human on Deadworld," says Kek-W, who scripted the framing sequence for artist Stewart Kenneth Moore.

"My story tells how it came to be, and knowing Judge Death's murderous impulses, its origins aren't pleasant. Readers of 'The Fall Of Deadworld' who have been following Death's rise to power know he's a control freak who loves to play games, particularly with the corpse of his own dead father. This story leans into all that, linking recent 'Fall Of Deadworld' tales back to early Judge Death canon. It's also a sly wink to Ingmar Bergman's legendary existential film, *The Seventh Seal*."

Admitting that "his patient, inevitable sadism appeals to the 1990s goth still stomping around inside me," Antony Johnston scripts Judge Mortis for artist Lee Carter.

"He's the only Dark Judge whose killing method is merely an acceleration of the end we all face anyway," he says. "Even without his intervention, in time the universe rots away to nothing. So what happens to this being who drains life from all he touches when the tables are turned and some force drains him?"

With artist Mark Sexton noting that Judge Fire has been depicted in 'The Fall Of Deadworld' as "more of a hothead driven by passions and emotions," writer Alex de Campi portrays him as more of a blank slate. "I've set Fire up as an avatar of the human urge for hatred and violence, which alas is a fire that never dies, it just goes underground for a while," he says.

"My story is what happens when the flames start coming back up through the cracks in society, as Judges Anderson and Giant investigate a rash of self-immolations during a hot, violent summer in the city."

"We've previously seen the Dark Judges as merely organic puppets possessed and driven by immensely powerful spirits that can cross dimensions, but that's just a fraction of their power," adds Sexton. "In this story, Fire is just a small part of that already restricted spirit, but still very powerful, and because he's undead, time means nothing.

"This story harks back to Necropolis, so this small part of Fire has taken many years to subtly influence susceptible victims to create a new way back to Dredd's world. It's a creepy idea – these tiny pieces of the Dark Judges' souls adrift in Mega-City One, slowly poisoning and corrupting the reality around them in a slow and patient effort to find their way back."

Writer Alec Worley is striving to make Judge Fear scary again, in a story described by artist Leigh Gallagher as "a claustrophobic, atmospheric tale dripping in creepiness."

"He's been immortalised as a bit of a chump thanks to the ubiquity of Brian Bolland's iconic 'gaze into the fist of Dredd' panel," Worley says. "I've gone for low-key spooky rather than high-pitched gothic, but can't say too much without spoiling. It's the tale of a self-conscious teen whose fear of the outside world runs deeper than she knows."

Judge Death Mega Special 2025 is out on 22 October.

Judge Death Mega Special 2025 art by Brian Bolland.

Art from *Tales For A Halloweenight* "The Hunger".

Art from "Crocodile", by David Hitchcock.

SWEET TREATS

John Carpenter gets ready for the big night

This year's *Tales For A Halloweenight* anthology offers a varied range of chilling tales from creators such as Storm King Comics co-founder John Carpenter.

Publisher Sandy King compares compiling it to "putting together a box of chocolates of horror". "'Cathedral' is the result of a dream I had," says Carpenter, who co-scripted with King for artist Federico De Luca. "The tone is darker than some of my previous stories and it's the introduction to the upcoming graphic novel."

Describing "Crocodile" as "a British folk horror tale about a teenage boy who finds himself trapped in limbo by a sinister playground game, a limbo that can only be escaped through sacrificing a friend," Alec Worley is impressed by Storm King's willingness to allow him to write authentically British stories, "With all the cynicism, nastiness and folksy weirdness that comes with that." Worley is paired once again with artist David Hitchcock. "He's got this perfectly woozy, nightmarish touch and totally understands how to stage a ghost story."

According to Joe Harris, his and artist Alex Sarabia's "Fake News" is "a take on the dark heart of middle America and what otherwise decent seeming folks are capable of under the right, manipulative circumstances."

Meanwhile, Frank Tieri and Cat Staggs's "American Werewolf In Brooklyn" pays tribute to John Landis's classic 1981 film. "It combines two of my favourite types of stories: mobsters and werewolves," says Tieri. "It was a blast for us putting the two genres together, and you can tell that from the work – right up until the surprise ending!"

Tales For A Halloweenight Volume 11 is out on 13 October.

WORDS:
ROBBIE DUNLOP

8-BIT

ART THE CLOWN LEVELS UP IN TERRIFIER: THE ARTCADE GAME

LEX SALCEDO OF SELECTA Play – the gaming branch of Selecta Visión, the distributor that brought *Terrifier 2* and *3* to Spanish cinemas – calls *Terrifier: The ARTcade Game* a "love letter" to the franchise. "We've always aimed to bring well-known IPs into the world of gaming, and *Terrifier* was a perfect fit," he tells *SFX*. "Thanks to our strong relationship and past collaboration with [franchise sales agent] The Coven, we were able to pitch the idea and make it happen."

Classic arcade-style fightin' awaits, with tons of gore.

Aww, it's Christmas. And Art's out sleighing.

Expect typically over-the-top effects.

Is the game based on the films, or does it tell an original story?
The game doesn't retell the films beat by beat; it creates a story that plays out like a twisted spin-off within the *Terrifier* universe. Each stage is imagined as a film set, where Art shows up to turn the production into real carnage. That setup gave us the freedom to include familiar faces, references and nods to the movies, while still surprising fans with new scenarios and encounters they've never seen on screen.

How would you describe the style of gameplay on offer?
It's classic pixel-art side-scrolling beat 'em up. We chose this route because it mirrors Art the Clown's style: simple on the surface, but brutal and unpredictable in execution. The arcade format also lets us lean into that retro "ARTcade" feel, while still delivering surprises. Each stage builds to a boss encounter that will catch players off guard, and along the way you'll get to control not just Art, but other iconic characters from the films.

What was the biggest challenge in translating *Terrifier*'s grindhouse horror style into interactive gameplay?
Making sure we didn't disappoint the fans. *Terrifier* has built a reputation on extreme practical gore and dark humour, and the community expects nothing less from anything carrying the name. Translating that meant walking a fine line: too tame and it wouldn't feel like *Terrifier*; too realistic and it would stop being fun. Players get the same shocking, gruesome spirit of the films, but in a way that feels playful and re-playable. The goal was always to make fans feel we honoured the franchise, while giving them a new way to revel in Art the Clown's chaos.

Hand-drawn designs for various characters.

***Terrifier* is infamous for its practical gore. How did you tackle translating that into digital form?**
We leaned heavily into exaggeration and timing, making every hit, dismemberment and execution feel violent and satisfying, while still staying true to Art the Clown's brutal personality.

The pixel style gave us freedom to push the gore in creative, almost playful ways, combining bright retro visuals with grotesque detail. We also designed an arsenal of weapons

Cover art for the limited edition physical version.

There's local co-op multiplayer, too.

and unique finishing moves that capture the same shock factor fans expect from the films, but presented with a wink to arcade classics.

When we went through certification with the different platforms, we actually ran into some censorship. Certain platforms required us to adjust a few elements in order to comply with ratings and ensure the game could be commercially released worldwide.

Even with those changes, we're confident that the experience preserves the essence of *Terrifier* and delivers the same raw, chaotic style that fans love.

How important has fan input been during development? Is there a pressure to deliver on expectations?

Fan input has been hugely important for us. We knew from the start that carrying the *Terrifier* name meant fans would have strong expectations, so we've listened closely. The demo gave us a ton of valuable feedback – everything from difficulty tweaks to small quality-of-life details.

We've made adjustments based on that. We've also paid attention to what the community has been saying on social media, and it's helped us shape the experience to feel both authentic and fun.

> **"Players get the same shocking, gruesome spirit of the films, in a way that feels playful"**

How involved was *Terrifier* creator Damien Leone?

Damien supervised and reviewed the game throughout its development, and he showed great support for the project by actively showing it on social media.

And Art the Clown himself, David Howard Thornton?

Last June we showcased – on Future Games Show – a new trailer announcing the demo. We filmed David dressed as Art and playing it as the character would play, with reactions and everything. There is still stuff to come. We hope we can do more with not only David, but with other members of the cast or even Damien.

What are you most excited for fans to discover when they play the game?

We're really excited to see how fans react when they start streaming and sharing their playthroughs; those live reactions are priceless. And we can't wait for everyone to finally face the final boss, which we think will be a real standout moment for the community.

What directions could you see a sequel or expansion taking?

Right now our full focus is on delivering the best possible experience with this game. We don't have anything to announce yet, but we love hearing what fans would like to see, and that feedback will help guide where we might go next...

Terrifier: The ARTcade Game is available to pre-order for PC, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X and Nintendo Switch now.

DROP ON BY THE CLOWN CAFE

ART THE CLOWN IS TERRORISING BOTH THE EAST AND WEST COAST AS TERRIFIER TAKES OVER THIS YEAR'S **HALLOWEEN HORROR NIGHTS**

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

CLOWN
CAFE

BARRELS
OF
FUN

DOLLY MADE

ART
CRIMES

CKEN EXIT

The indoor house facade in Orlando features Art's face.

Gore-fans have renamed this scene "The Crack Of Dawn".

A section of the house referencing the third film.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST AND best spooky season celebrations is Universal Studios' Halloween Horror Nights, taking over four of their global theme parks annually.

This year, for around 50 evenings between August and November, their Hollywood and Orlando destinations share five haunted houses based on known franchises – *Fallout*, Jason Universe, WWE, *Five Nights At Freddy's* and *Terrifier*.

Art the Clown has become something of an event icon this year, roaming the streets and appearing in unexpected places, and taking part in the opening ceremony in Hollywood. These appearances have, of course, gone viral.

> **"Art the Clown is the first iconic slasher movie character in two decades"**

Various gore-filled scenes from the films are referenced.

FUNHOUSE FACTS!

- The house uses six gallons of blood and has 35 bodies inside – the most they've ever done for a haunted house at HHN at both events.
- It's the first time they've ever used the scent of bleach – guests are sprayed with water at the same time.
- It was the sixth house built in Orlando, out of 10, for this year's event.
- The codename for the Orlando house was Poinsettia, as all the houses were named after flowers this year.
- *Terrifier* is the first house based on an unrated movie.
- *Terrifier* is the longest house on both coasts in 2025.
- There are nine scenes in Orlando – some may have two or three small sections within them: Facade, Art's Welcome Surprise, Bleach Scalping, Clown Cafe, Vicky and Art, Bathrooms, Christmas, Kill Shot and Symphony Of Blood.
- Iron is the scent that HHN uses to represent blood – it's piped in during the Symphony Of Blood scene.
- The Orlando house has two exits – one dry, one wet. If you take the wet path, you'll see Sienna in her costume holding Art's head, and also headless Art.
- Management got a video message from David Howard Thornton to encourage Universal tour guides.
- The Orlando house uses a 250-gallon water tank, with pool filters to keep the water clean, which flows in and out of the soundstage.
- This is the first house featured in Orlando's Soundstage 25 since *Stranger Things* during Halloween Horror Nights 29.
- In Hollywood, *Terrifier* is at the Upper Lot, located at Curious George Tent 2.

Hollywood's John Murdy in the Silly Saw scene room.

John Murdy, Creative Director and Executive Producer of HHN Hollywood, explains why that decision was an easy one: "Art the Clown is the new face of horror. He is the first iconic slasher movie character in two decades. Guests love him.

"We've got a troupe of Arts that we put through our version of mime school, so that we can have him just show up in the most random places."

Murdy says they started talking to creator and director Damien Leone in early 2024. "What I loved about working with Damien is he said something that we always hope people we work with will say, 'You guys are the experts.' So it was more about picking his

THE ART OF ART

John Murdy welcomes you into the Funhouse

"[The entrance] is all about the legacy of Art. We've printed all of the newspaper clippings and images from Sienna's father's notebook. So they're all over the walls – they're even printed on the curtains. But as you're coming down this first hallway, we wanted to make it feel like a cheesy funhouse. So behind the scrim, there is a very simple, very off-the-shelf, eBay-purchased Art the Clown that anybody could buy that you could put in your front yard."

Refresh yourself on Art's bloody legacy.

Hollywood features a giant Art the Clown puppet.

Probably the nicest thing you'll see in the funhouse.

The prosthetics were made by the team behind the films.

Yep – that's the real scent of bleach you can smell.

The mashed potato scene in Hollywood stays on script.

EASTER EGGS

- The Orlando house features a nod to in-house icon Jack The Clown in one of the scenes.
- A painting in the initial Christmas room in Orlando features a house with Art depicted inside a window.
- A small lizard is hidden by design in each house – in *Terrifier*, it appears in the bleach scene, painted like Art.
- David Howard Thornton named the most violent kill in the franchise one featuring rats in *Terrifier 3*, where he threw up. It's represented in the house by a pile of fake vomit.
- All the masks and prosthetics featured in the Hollywood *Terrifier* house were produced by Christien Tinsley, the FX makeup artist behind the looks in *Terrifier 3*.

brain – not literally – about what he felt was important about Art, and also the fans have their favourite kills.

"Fans of this franchise are expecting us to go places that they don't think we're going to go, so our job is to take them there," Murdy says. "Nothing was off-limits when designing the *Terrifier* house, which was really fun for our team.

"The most complicated part was to deliver on the extreme gore of the franchise for the fans."

The result is a greatest hits – sometimes literally – from all three movies, including the goriest of Art's kill scenes.

"Thematically, when we were collaborating with our sister park in Orlando, we landed on the idea of this all being set in the *Terrifier* Funhouse from *Terrifier 2*. But if there was a kill that didn't happen in the Funhouse, we figured a way to make it happen, because we just thought that would be a really cool theme. There's nothing creepier than walking through haunted houses in travelling carnivals. I've certainly been through a lot of really freaky ones. The cheesier, the scarier – especially in Europe, there's a lot of really weird ones!"

Take a look at our exclusive behind the scenes photos to prepare for your visit – Art's hospitality tends to end in a permanent stay...

Halloween Horror Nights is at Universal Studios Orlando and Universal Studios Hollywood until 2 November. Visit halloweenhorrornights.com. Flights and package deals are available from virginatlantic.com. Ticket deals at attractiontickets.com and LA info at discoverlosangeles.com.

GOING DEEPER

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TWENTY YEARS AFTER IT TERRIFIED AUDIENCES, WE DISCUSS CLAUSTROPHOBIC CAVING HORROR THE DESCENT WITH LEAD ACTRESS SHAUNA MACDONALD WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

UNDERGR UND

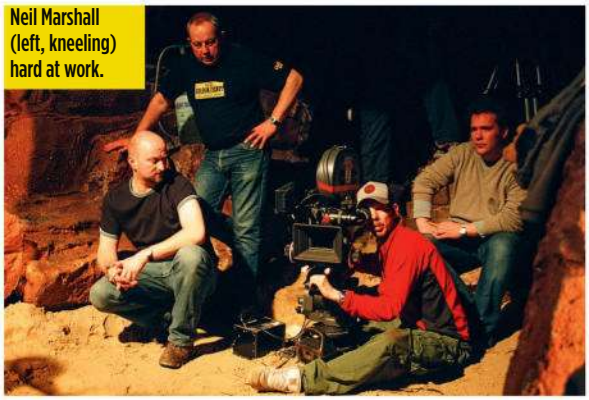
BY THE EARLY NOUGHTIES, "people in peril" survival horror films were ubiquitous. It took the might of British director Neil Marshall, who struck survival horror gold with his 2002 squaddies-in-peril debut *Dog Soldiers*, and an enthusiastic cast of largely unknown young female actors to breathe new, terrifying life into the subgenre. The result was *The Descent*, an intensely claustrophobic chiller that follows six friends as they explore an uncharted cave system beneath the Appalachian Mountains and are hunted by a breed of ravenous humanoid creatures.

"It was really clever casting, because nobody was a name, and we had nothing to lose and everything to gain – so we just threw ourselves into it," Shauna Macdonald, who played the lead character, Sarah, tells *SFX*. "Everyone was early on in their careers and wanted this to be the best British horror movie of all time."

With a tip of the hat to *Alien*, *The Descent* establishes a team of credible characters you spend considerable time with before any bloodsucking monsters come crawling their way. "Neil was really committed to creating realistic people and putting them in an unrealistic situation. He wanted us to be complex but likeable, because you've got to care whether your characters live or die," continues Macdonald.

To enhance camaraderie among the all-female cast, Marshall organised three weeks of rehearsals and training that included rock climbing, white-water rafting and caving expeditions, which helped build a natural bond and trust among the group. "When it was time to shoot, and luckily we started with the log cabin and white-water rafting scenes first, we were already friends and understood the dynamics of the group," says Macdonald.

Sarah escapes from the cave... or does she?



Neil Marshall (left, kneeling) hard at work.

Before filming, the cast bonded for three weeks.

CREEPY CRAWLIES

However, this initially tight-knit group gradually begins to splinter as they become trapped in the increasingly claustrophobic confines of the unexplored cave. Suppressed emotional truths emerge and relationships are pushed to extremes, particularly for Sarah, a grieving mother who, a year earlier, lost her daughter and husband in a car crash.

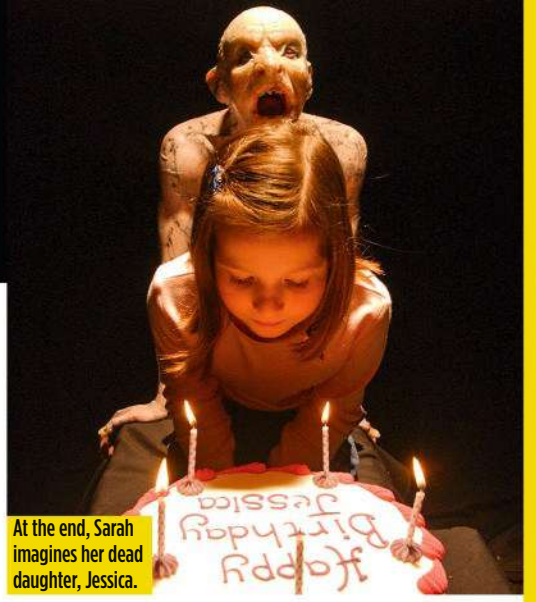
"The descent of Sarah was a huge leap for me as an actor. I'd done emotional stuff before, but in terms of the physicality and the level of grief that she suffered and getting all the nuances with her friendships — it was a massive challenge," she continues. "When you're the lead in something that requires lots of action, it's exhausting and physically demanding. We shot just before Christmas, and it was dark. You get up in the dark, go to work in a cave, and go home to the dark. By the end, you're severely lacking in vitamin D, and you start to go slightly bonkers, like a lot of people do when they're working on a shoot, because it's this microcosm of activity. You're separated from your family and friends, this is like your new family and friends, so you're cocooned into this sort of story."

What begins in the film as a vast, awe-inspiring cavern slowly transforms into a cramped, cold and suffocating nightmare, its claustrophobic realism meticulously crafted by production designer Simon Bowles across three massive stages in Pinewood Studios. "He had a great idea that the colours would change as you go through the cave system – so it's vast and cathedral-like at the beginning, and then as you descend, and Sarah descends, it gets smaller and smaller and cramped until the last moment," adds Macdonald. "The colour palettes were very different for different sections, and we shot most of it chronologically once we entered the cave, which was incredibly helpful for me and the girls to keep track of where we were."

Arguably, one of the most agonising moments in *The Descent* is when Sarah becomes seemingly wedged in a crawlspace early on. "Everyone loves that scene because it's such a primal fear of getting stuck," says Macdonald. "We had to ADR it because the rocks were made out of polystyrene, and there wasn't any way to avoid the sound issue. So, Alex [Reid, who played Beth] came into the ADR with me. We acted it out again on the floor with the mic and the image of us trying to time it to our leg movements, and we managed to get a scene that people feel is totally terrifying and horrific."

As if being trapped in a cave wasn't enough, the women soon realise they're not alone and are being hunted by a family of ravenous creatures. To keep the characters' reactions authentic, these "crawlers" were kept a mystery from the cast until the moment their characters first encountered them, with the reveal fuelling the genuinely shocked performances.

"We were totally kept away from them because they wanted us to be surprised, horrified, intrigued and disgusted when we saw them for the first time," reveals Macdonald. "When you see that close-up shot of a crawler behind Beth's head, it's actually my character filming them. So I did some filming and got to watch the girls' reactions. The girls were already



At the end, Sarah imagines her dead daughter, Jessica.

The leads didn't mix with the "crawler" actors.

in place, and they ran the scene up to that point. Then they'd shout 'Cut!' and Craig Conway, who played the lead crawler, would come in under this blanket and crouch behind a rock. We'd roll back a little in the scene, but now the girls were more tense because they knew something was about to happen, just not exactly when. When the crawler suddenly lurches behind Beth, the girls just wet themselves, screamed, and ran straight for the fire exit! So the suspense of not knowing what was down there really paid off."

In addition, the actors playing the crawlers were kept separate from the cast even after their initial onscreen encounter, helping to intensify the fight scenes. "It was great that we were kept apart, because it's quite intimidating and scary fighting somebody that you don't know," says Macdonald. "They'd shout 'Cut!' and the crawlers would be whisked away, we'd be whisked away, and then you go back in. I thought it was incredibly impactful and exciting to do, and it really helped elevate everything."

GIRL POWER

Being placed under such extreme circumstances would drive anyone to the edge, and part of the appeal of the film is watching a tightly bonded group slowly fracture, as they descend into primal survival mode by the end. "A lot of people said, 'It's such a feminist movie' and I said, 'Have you seen what we do to each other?' This was back in the early 2000s when there was 'Girl Power' and the Spice Girls and people were still talking like that, and saying, 'The Girl Power Movie'. It's really not; it's a film with complex female characters, and when they face a common foe, their friendships fracture and splinter, and it's every person for themselves. In *Dog Soldiers*, it was a group of squaddies facing a common foe, and they all come together and fight it together, whereas we betray each other."

There are theories that the crawlers never existed at all; that they were manifestations of Sarah's fractured psyche, symbolic of her internal turmoil and grief, rather than a tangible threat. Indeed, by the end of the film, Sarah herself becomes increasingly brutal, even turning on one of her own when certain truths come to light. "The thing that pushes Sarah to do it is that Juno [played by Natalie Mendoza] had left Beth to die alone," considers Macdonald. "Having lost her daughter and husband, I think that was enough for her. But of course, it was the grief as well; she's not thinking rationally by that point. That was the ultimate punishment: not only had Juno had an affair with her [late] husband, but she'd also left their friend to die alone."

Unlike their characters, Shauna says that even after 20 years, the bond between the cast remains strong. "We all love each other, and are still in contact," she reflects. "We've even got a WhatsApp group, we speak often, and we are very much part of each other's lives. It's such a gift, having these women in my life."

SEQUEL SORROWS

Was Part 2 a descent too far?

In 2008, Shauna Macdonald returned to shoot the watered-down second chapter. However, as she explains, what ended up onscreen was somewhat different from what was originally shot.

"When we shot *The Descent: Part 2*, what they did do, but ultimately cut, was pick it up right where the first film left off," reveals Macdonald. "It was a massive stunt day, cost a lot of money, and they should've kept it."

After imagining her escape from the cave, *The Descent* ends (in the original UK cut) with sole survivor Sarah retreating into a hallucination, during which she is reunited with her daughter on a rocky ledge, the two of them sitting beside a birthday cake.

"For *Part 2*, what we shot was this: you go back in, it's a different girl, because it was five years later, and she's got her back to the scene. She stands up, I take her hand, and we jump into the abyss, which becomes this underwater torrent," continues Macdonald.

"We shot it at Ealing Studios. They tied a rope around my ankle, half-submerged a tunnel-like cave system, blasted a rapid through it, and said, 'Just act like you're drowning!'" she laughs. "Then they pulled me through this torrent, and then it cut to this still lake. I burst through the water shouting, 'Jessie! Jessie! Jessie!' – because I think my daughter is drowning somewhere after being washed out, and I'm trying to find her, then I collapse on the riverbank.

"At the time, I thought, 'Great! That makes sense. That's the exit of the cave; she gets washed out. She still believes Jessie is in there, so of course she'd go back in to find her.' But when I finally sat down to watch the movie, all of that had been cut. There was all this amnesia rubbish, and that's when I realised what kind of film I was about to watch."

The cast stay in touch via WhatsApp.

Juno (Natalie Mendoza) gets in a scrap.

> "A lot of people said it's a feminist movie. Have you seen what we do to each other?"

PICTURES © CELADOR FILMS, CINEMATIC / ALAMY.

THE SFX ARCHIVES
STRANGER THINGS
SEASON FOUR

BACK TO THE UPSIDE DOWN 4

TAKE A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE AS WE CELEBRATE SEASON FOUR OF **STRANGER THINGS**

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

The Hellfire Club get ready for another *D&D* game.

SEASON FOUR THE EPISODE TITLES

CHAPTER ONE
THE HELLFIRE CLUB

CHAPTER TWO
VECNA'S CURSE

CHAPTER THREE
THE MONSTER AND THE SUPERHERO

CHAPTER FOUR
DEAR BILLY

CHAPTER FIVE
THE NINA PROJECT

CHAPTER SIX
THE DIVE

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE MASSACRE AT HAWKINS LAB

CHAPTER EIGHT
PAPA

CHAPTER NINE
THE PIGGYBACK

The final season of *Stranger Things* is nearly here! In order to prepare for your upcoming season five binge, step into the *SFX* interview archives for exclusive, all-new treats from the past. Whether you want behind-the-scenes secrets from the cast and crew, on-set stories from your Hawkins favourites or interviews we've never published before, we've got you covered.

ALL QUOTES AND INTERVIEWS FROM THIS RETROSPECTIVE ARTICLE ARE FROM 2017 AND 2019.

THE FOURTH SEASON OF *STRANGER Things* was released in two bumper volumes of spooky deliciousness. The first batch of seven episodes dropped on Netflix on 27 May 2022 and the final two episodes followed on 1 July, just in time for Independence Day celebrations in the USA.

Set in March 1986, the main storyline was a global adventure that introduced the world to Vecna, Eddie Munson and the Hellfire Club. A multitude of plots saw the key characters in Indiana, California, Alaska and Nevada, as well as a brutal battle with a Demogorgon in a Soviet prison camp.

"There are several storylines coursing through the fourth season, one of which is me in Russia," explained David Harbour (aka Jim Hopper) at New York Comic-Con. "I think the Duffers have talked about *The Great Escape* being one of their inspirations this year."

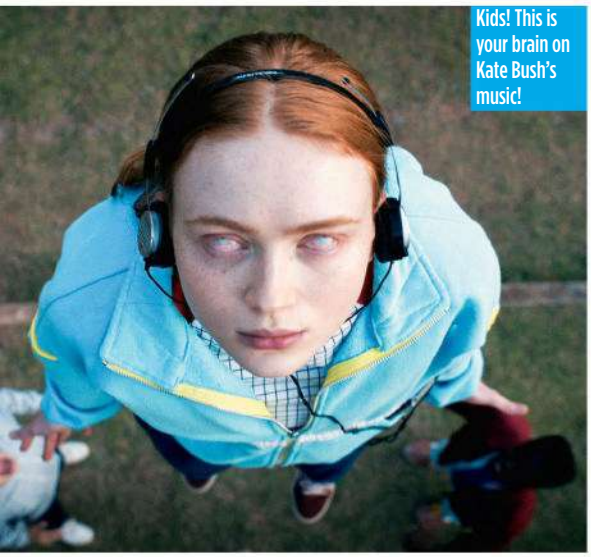
Jim Hopper (David Harbour) gets a new look.

He continued: "You've seen that there is a Demogorgon in prison from last season. Well, I think they've also talked about *Alien 3*, which was the [David] Fincher *Alien*. There's an escape and there's a 'Hopper trying to get home to his family' element to it, which is really incredible."

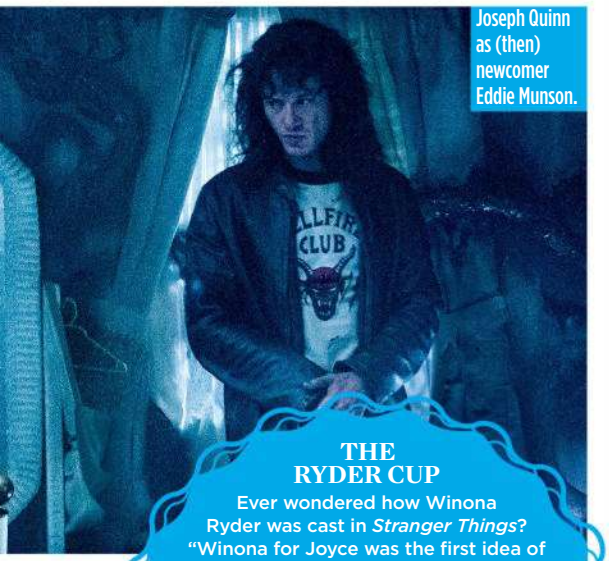
What else was teased by Harbour? "You'll also see a lot more layers about Eleven [Millie Bobby Brown] and Brenner [Matthew Modine] and the Institute – and what she went through. And then there's this new Creel House thing, which is a new element of a situation in Hawkins."

Speaking about the core cast of the show, Harbour went on to explain: "I think you're going to see more development of the Joyce-Hopper relationship, which we've all wanted. And then you're going to see more of the Hopper and Eleven development."

"To me, it's the deepest season we've gotten to go with Hopper. And it's the most self-aware. He starts to uncover these truths that we've only hinted at before, so it's a really deep season and it's got tremendous action to it. Action on a level that we've never done before, which is really exciting. I'm so sorry it's taken so long. It's going to be so good, though."



Kids! This is your brain on Kate Bush's music!



Joseph Quinn as (then) newcomer Eddie Munson.

THE RYDER CUP

Ever wondered how Winona Ryder was cast in *Stranger Things*? "Winona for Joyce was the first idea of our casting director, Carmen," revealed Matt Duffer. "Ross and I grew up on Winona Ryder. We are huge Winona Ryder fans. In the '90s, the number of movies that have become classics that star Winona, it's just unbelievable. Her movies were on our VHS rotation, so she is a legend to me and I immediately jumped at the idea. She was being under-used for a time, but there was a movement where you had phenomenal actors who you hadn't seen enough of making a major comeback in TV. Winona is perfect."

Watching the electrifying '80s action on the small screen, audiences continued to marvel at the attention to detail of the sets and the surroundings. "I would love to take credit for that, but that's really down to our production team – led by Chris Trujillo – and our set decorator Jess Royal," Ross Duffer explained to *SFX*.

"They do an incredible amount of research. Any time we go into their offices, their walls are filled with this stuff. They will go to all these antique shops and wherever they can to dig up all this amazing stuff. They spend countless hours finding all these little details." The creative team has no qualms about asking →

TRICK OR TREAT

Back in season two, the bike-riding buddies of *Stranger Things* turned heads in the show when they arrived at school in an iconic *Ghostbusters* group costume. To commemorate this year's spooky season, we uncovered a chat with the young cast where they discussed their favourite Halloween memories...

Who you gonna call? Probably not these lot.

FROM THE SFX ARCHIVES

DATE
22 February 2017

LOCATION
Atlanta, Georgia

MILLIE BOBBY BROWN

☆ "Last year, Gaten's mum saved me. It was Halloween and I was, like, 'I don't have a costume.' She said to me, 'Don't worry.' And she went and got me one. My best costume was probably Batgirl. I had the full-on outfit. I had eyeliner, I had black lipstick and it felt very cool."

CALEB MCLAUGHLIN

☆ "My favourite Halloween costume? For my best costume, I was a mime – but I did talk a lot. [Laughs] My sister was, like, 'Be quiet.' And I was, like, 'Oh sorry!' But I was really excited."

FINN WOLFHARD

☆ "My best Halloween costume was probably when I went as Jack Skellington from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. I wore it at school, where there was a costume contest – but when I got home, the make-up was melting and we didn't have any more. I asked my mom, 'What are we going to do? I'm not going to look like Jack Skellington.' Thankfully, my mom improvised. She got me a leather jacket, a rope, a fake gun from Disneyland and an old hat from England – and she made me into a bandit. I was a robber. They were both really good looks."

NOAH SCHNAPP

☆ "For me, I don't know what it was – but it was this big, black costume that was really tall and it had little red laser things for the eyes. I'm really small, so I stood under it and people actually got scared by it!"

GATEN MATARAZZO

☆ "When it comes to Halloween costumes, I usually go last minute. I wait until I have nothing else to do and then go to find the last costume that fits me. There was this one year that I actually took some time to try and be Peter Pan. The costume came with a hat that had a pink feather and I looked like Robin Hood – but I didn't want to look like Robin Hood.

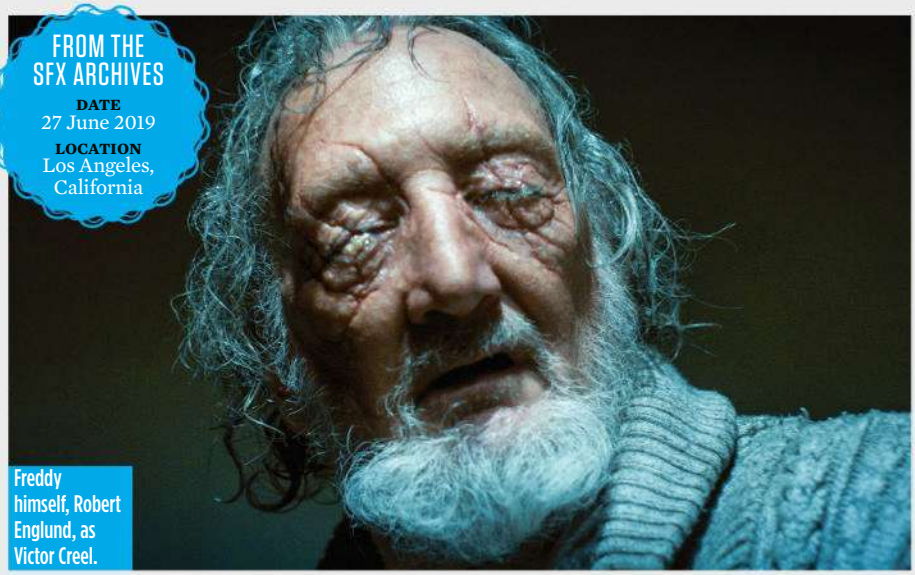
My mom was like, 'Okay, I have an idea.' She fluffed up my hair and put gold glitter in it, so it looked like pixie dust and I looked a little more like Peter Pan. For two months after that, I could have taken three showers a day and I still find glitter in my hair. It was the best and worst costume ever."

THE UNPUBLISHED *SFX* INTERVIEW

THE DUFFER BROTHERS

MATT AND ROSS DUFFER SPOKE TO *SFX* AT THE LONDON HOTEL IN WEST HOLLYWOOD FOR AN INTERVIEW ON *STRANGER THINGS* SETS, SCRIPTS AND SEASON FOUR STORYLINES...

FROM THE SFX ARCHIVES
DATE
27 June 2019
LOCATION
Los Angeles, California



Freddy himself, Robert Englund, as Victor Creel.

How does your relationship as twins help you in terms of the creation of the show? Can you communicate by telepathy?

Ross: It's not telepathic, but we know each other really well, so one look can communicate a lot. There's telepathy in that. We don't necessarily have to communicate a lot to tell each other how we are feeling and what to do. A scene will play and we can just shoot a look at each other and then someone goes off to deal with either a camera or the actors to get it to where we want it to go.

Obviously, we have grown up together and we have spent so much of our lives together. We went to school together, we went to college together and we now work together, so we are on the same page. There are occasional disagreements, but someone always wins that argument.

How would you describe your writing process?

Matt: We always write to music. If you watch me and my brother write, it's very weird because we don't really speak to one another – but we are within 10 feet of one another, on computers, usually working on the same document at the same time and listening to separate things.

We mostly listen to movie soundtracks. I know movie soundtracks and movie composers a lot more than I do popular musicians. I think our first music love was Danny Elfman, it wasn't U2 or anything like that.

How do your communication skills help with the writing of the show?

Ross: We are both on the document at the same time and I don't think we would be able to do this with anyone else. We are able to flow as one organism, if you will. It certainly speeds things up.

Matt: But I don't know how anyone does it by themselves or runs a show by themselves. We need the two of us in order to divide and conquer and get everything done, especially the writing. It feels like an enormous amount of writing. I don't know how anyone ever did a 22-episode schedule.

Ross: Yes, this is enough.

Which horror movies scared you the most when you were younger?

Ross: The problem is, we desensitised ourselves because we watched so many scary movies as kids. It's harder and harder for me to get scared nowadays, but I remember the *It* miniseries in 1990. We saw that when we were really young and that really traumatised us. I am still afraid of clowns.

We also saw *Evil Dead* when we were way too young. Even though there is some comedy in that movie, you don't really see comedy in it when you are nine years old. It was horrifying. Those were the movies that led us to go, "Oh, wait. We really like being scared. We like the feeling of it." And then we just sought out everything, whether it was *Nightmare On Elm Street*, *The Thing* or any of these other movies.

What fuelled your love of horror?

Matt: Our dad hated horror. He was not into it at all, so it felt like our own thing. Our friends weren't really into it either, so it felt like our own discovery when we were finding these films. I remember finding films like *Hellraiser* and watching it by ourselves late at night in a dark room and really scaring ourselves.

What's your earliest memory of horror?

Matt: I don't know why that emotion was so appealing to us, but one of my earliest memories was about finding out who Freddy Krueger was. I don't know why this babysitter was telling me this story about Freddy Krueger. I must have been four or five years old, but it just seared into my brain.

That emotion stuck with us to the point where we were knew we want to tell stories in this genre space. However, the great thing about TV is the big canvas where you can tell these cinematic stories and you can explore so many different tones. You can have comedy, romance and drama, as well as a monster and action. We can do everything that we love. We are not married to one tone.

What were you like as youngsters?

Matt: We were nerds, if you can believe it. We were mostly film nerds. We loved film, so we saw every movie that came out in theatres and we rented every movie we could get our hands on. We started making movies around the third grade, which was when we got our first Hi8 video camera. We would recruit our friends to make those movies, so the best times of our lives, still to this day, were the summers back then.

How would you describe those summers?

Matt: It was really hot and humid in North Carolina, but we would go out with our friends and we would make what we call a feature-length movie, but they were more like an hour long or something like that. They were very crude. There was no cutting. The music was played on a tape recorder, but we did it every year – from third grade to us graduating high school. We slowly taught ourselves how to make something not terrible. That was our childhood, mixed with videogames.

What's your take on this, Ross?

Ross: Making those movies with our friends felt like we were going on adventures. We weren't finding monsters, but we tried to capture that dynamic in the show.

Matt: We weren't lounging around in the summer. It felt like we had a very big challenge ahead of us, to organise ourselves and make something spectacular. Because our imagination was so big, we took it very, very seriously.

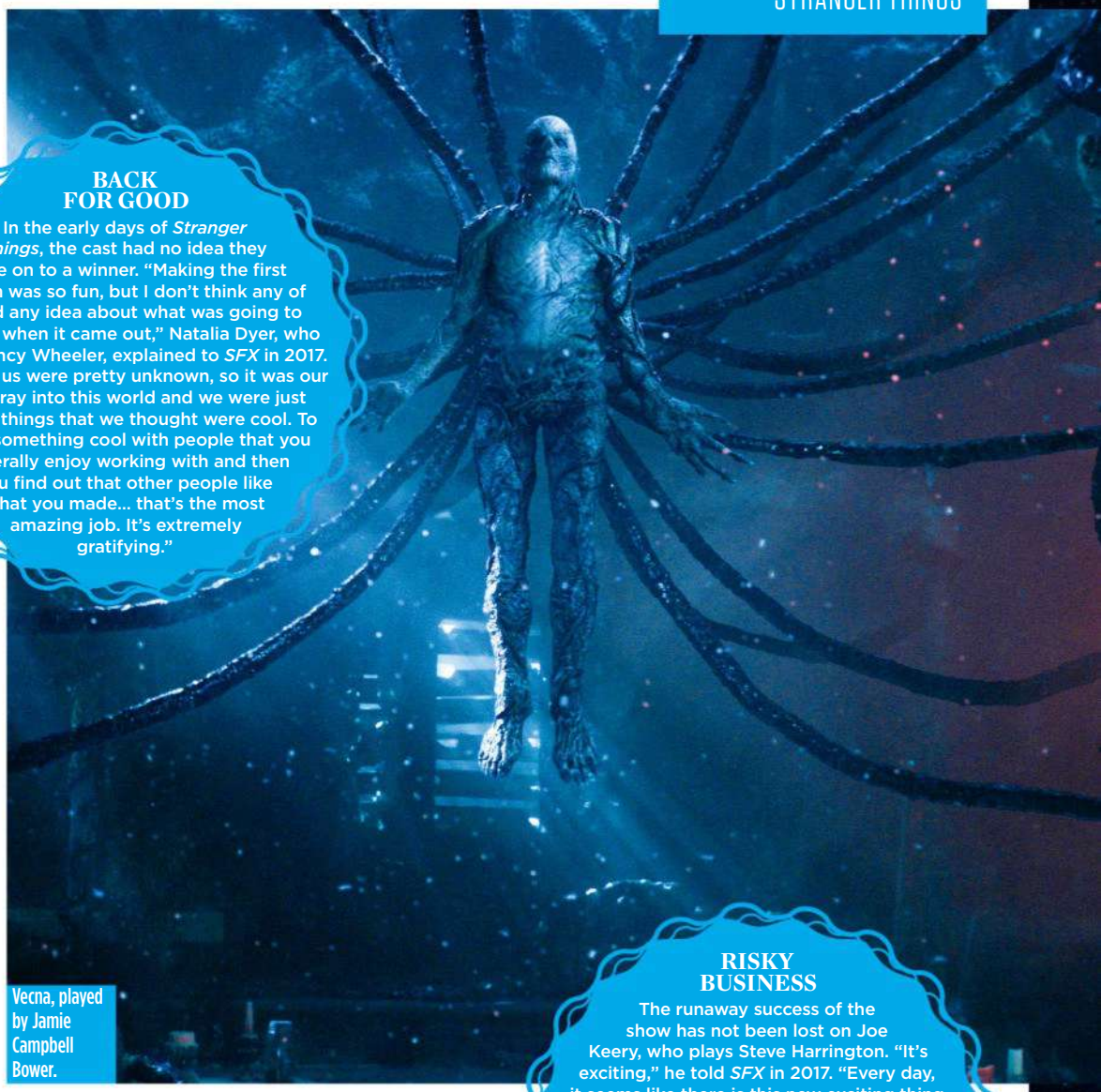
BATMAN OR BUST

A lot of thought goes into each season's storyline. "I always think about Chris Nolan when he was talking about making the *Batman* movies," explained Matt Duffer in 2017. "He never agreed to a sequel unless he figured out a way into it that made him feel excited. We try to think about it in that way. We want to feel the potential and we want to be excited about it – and it has to make sense narratively."

Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) is in a right state.

Yuri, Joyce Byers and Murray Bauman.

It's no good looking to the heavens for help, lads...


Vecna, played by Jamie Campbell Bower.

BACK FOR GOOD

In the early days of *Stranger Things*, the cast had no idea they were on to a winner. "Making the first season was so fun, but I don't think any of us had any idea about what was going to happen when it came out," Natalia Dyer, who plays Nancy Wheeler, explained to *SFX* in 2017. "Most of us were pretty unknown, so it was our first foray into this world and we were just making things that we thought were cool. To make something cool with people that you generally enjoy working with and then you find out that other people like what you made... that's the most amazing job. It's extremely gratifying."

RISKY BUSINESS

The runaway success of the show has not been lost on Joe Keery, who plays Steve Harrington. "It's exciting," he told *SFX* in 2017. "Every day, it seems like there is this new exciting thing that is happening. You look forward to all these events and sharing this story and the show – but at the same time, it's a little scary. I sometimes get freaked out about losing anonymity, but at the end of the day, we get the privilege to do this job that so many people love and would like to do. The fact that we get this chance, it's one in a million. Mostly, I feel thankful for the show and that people like it."

to shoot a scene again if they spot something awry. Matt Duffer told *SFX*: "If anything is off, they watch the dailies and they see it and there's an email that goes out to everyone saying, 'This was a horrible mistake and we have to fix it.' Everyone is very focused on making sure this is as authentic as possible."

The same goes for the props in the show. "You go to the prop warehouse and it's like '80s heaven," enthused Matt Duffer. "Thank god for the internet because you are able to find a whole lot there.

"We needed an authentic My Little Pony backpack for Erica [played by Priah Ferguson] and you will find one of the 10 people in the world who still has that backpack from the '80s."

"We had to be careful with it, though," concluded Matt. "They wanted it back. I don't think they even knew which show it was used on, but hopefully at this point they do."

OUT OF THE BLUE

When it comes to the music of *Stranger Things*, attention to detail is also key. Season four brought Kate Bush's 1986 hit "Running Up That Hill" to a whole new generation of

> **"Everyone is very focused on making sure this is as authentic as possible"**

listeners, but what were the Duffers's favourite songs in the show? "Joy Division was a big one for us when we were growing up," Ross explained to *SFX*. "That really inspired us, so we made sure to get that in season one" – specifically, the track "Atmosphere".

As for Matt: "In season three, we wanted to get some Madonna into the show, but you have to get Madonna to agree. You can't just put Madonna in, so we were over the moon when we heard that she approved us using her songs. It's a huge sequence in a classic '80s montage set to 'Material Girl', which was a lot of fun."

When they're not thinking about the music, the props or the epic sets, the Duffer Brothers are busy working their magic in the writers' room for the show. For season four, they wrote an intense 800 pages for the nine scripts, or chapters, which made it nearly double the length of the previous three seasons.

It also made it the most perfect primer for the fifth and final season of *Stranger Things*, which is coming to Netflix very, very soon. Bring it on...

L Johnson as young Victor Creel (left).

The fifth and final season of Stranger Things will be released on Netflix in three parts. Part one premieres on 26 November, part two on 25 December and part three on 31 December.

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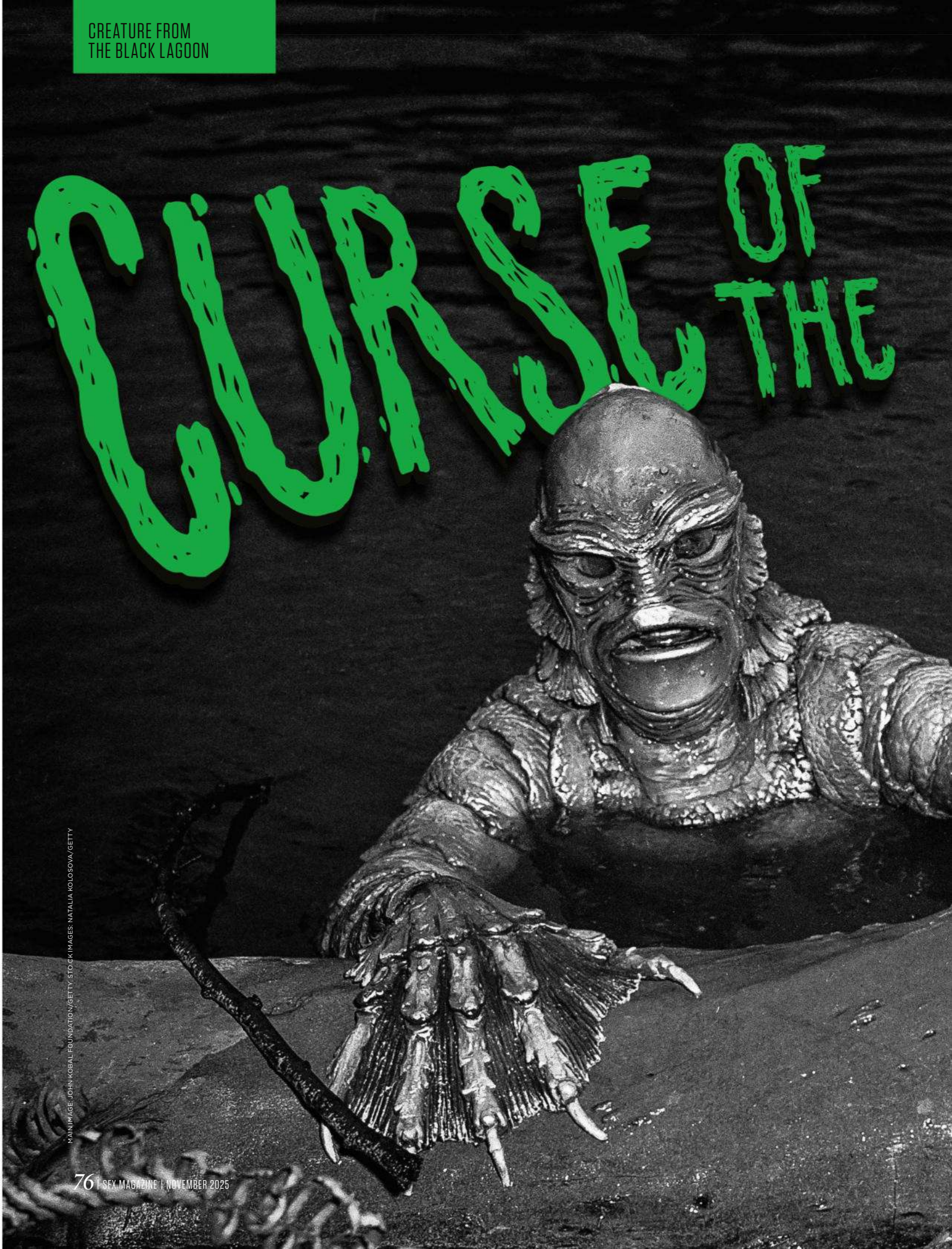
CURSE OF THE

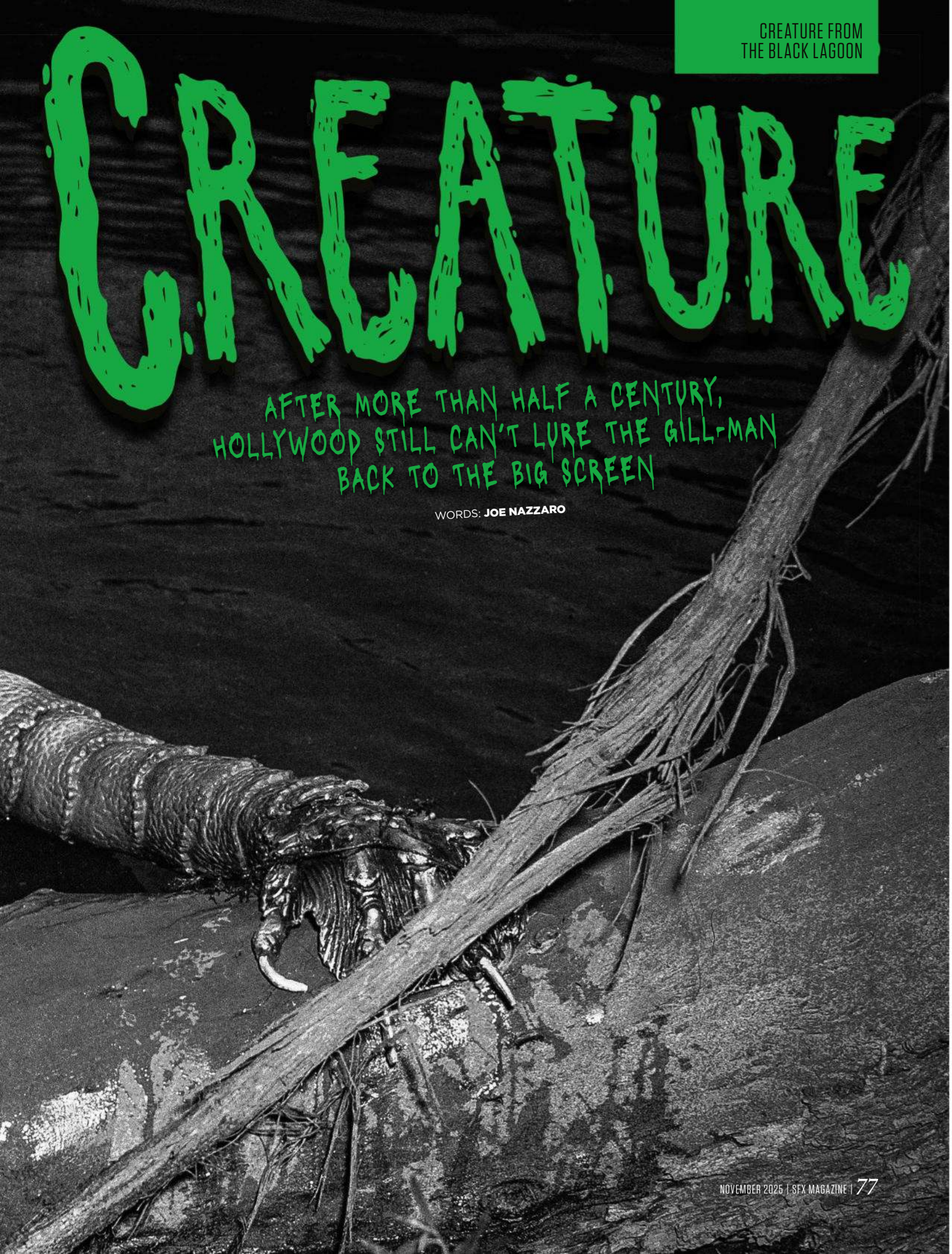


MAIN IMAGE: JOHN KOBAL FOUNDATION/GETTY; STOCK IMAGES: NATALIA KOLOSOVA/GETTY

CREATURE

AFTER MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY, HOLLYWOOD STILL CAN'T LURE THE GILL-MAN BACK TO THE BIG SCREEN

WORDS: **JOE NAZZARO**



IT'S BEEN MORE THAN 70 YEARS SINCE the eponymous amphibian of *Creature From The Black Lagoon* shambled his way onto American cinema screens and into the hearts of moviegoers round the world. But despite almost Universal recognition (pun intended), the studio's so-called "Gill-man" is their only iconic movie monster to never get a remake.

It's certainly not for lack of trying; more than a dozen A-list filmmakers have been involved in various attempts over the years, but none of them have even got to the cinematic starting gate, let alone a finish line.

Steve Wang's in-progress design for *The Monster Squad*.

CREATURE FEATURE

The first real attempt to reboot the franchise came in 1982 thanks to John Landis, who approached the original film's director Jack Arnold to helm a remake that Landis would produce from a script by Nigel Kneale. The new screenplay would feature two creatures; one "calm and sensitive", the other more destructive in temperament, both of who are targeted by the US Navy.

The creature effects would have been handled by Rick Baker, who had recently won a Best Makeup Oscar for his work with Landis on *An American Werewolf In London*. Writing in his recent autobiography, *Metamorphosis*, Baker said, "I was contacted a couple of times about the *Creature* remake. John Landis and Joe Dante were both involved, but nothing happened."

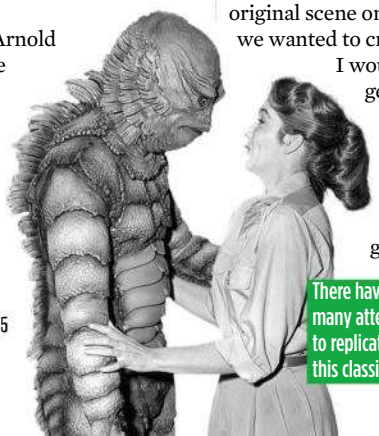
"Rick Baker would have done it," confirms Landis, "and there were preliminary designs, but nothing concrete. The studio chose to make *Jaws 3D* instead."

As Kneale recounted in the 2006 biography *Into The Unknown: The Fantastic Life Of Nigel Kneale*, he had worked out a rough screenplay that he was pleased with, featuring lots of humour and a cast of characters that was "bang up to date. Then came the problem: the horrendous cost of the special effects, costumes, etc. This created a great wrangle over the budget, and then *Jaws 3D* appeared on the horizon as a rival project. Although our budget was to have been considerably less than 20 million dollars, it was temporarily shelved." Ironically, the gimmick of 3D, which contributed to the original film's success in the mid-'50s, helped derail the remake three decades later.

Following the Landis/Arnold failure, director Joe Dante and producer Mike Fennell briefly considered a trip to the Black Lagoon, but it was actually Fred Dekker's 1987 kid-friendly horror-comedy *The Monster Squad* that brought an innovative Creature design to the big screen. Designed and built by Stan Winston Studio, the film's monsters had to look familiar, but not violate any of Universal's copyrighted characters – no easy task.

"We were trying to reinvent the Gill-man," remembers Steve Wang, who worked with Matt Rose to create the non-Creature. "The original Gill-man is my favourite monster of all time, so I personally wanted to pay tribute to it. You can see our main inspiration in the scene where he's walking forward and his gills are flaring, which was a tribute to the famous original scene on the boat. Other than that, we wanted to create something new, although I would have been happy to just get to replicate the original for the film!"

Oddly enough, Wang once had a fleeting glimpse of a potential *Creature* remake when a director friend was going for an interview about directing a reboot, and enlisted Wang to design and sculpt a maquette for the meeting. "Although he didn't get the job, he did say the studio called to ask if it was okay to use my design, even though he didn't get hired as the director, so I can't verify or discredit the comment. And the maquette melted in his car afterwards!"



There have been many attempts to replicate this classic.

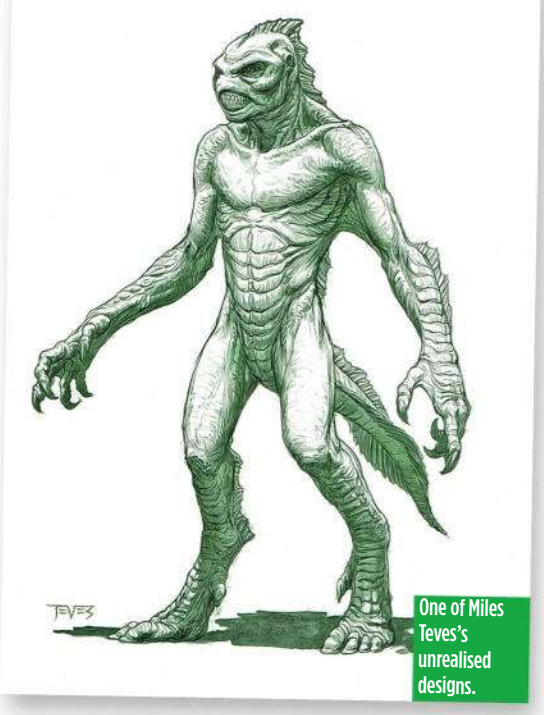
GILL POWER

After Dante's brief flirtation, the next contender was master of horror John Carpenter. The story goes that Universal chief Tom Pollock offered Carpenter carte blanche with the studio's catalogue, and the director immediately zeroed in on a *Creature* remake.

Finding the previous Nigel Kneale script a bit outdated, Carpenter brought in Bill Phillips, with whom he had successfully collaborated on *Christine*. The new story centred on marine biologist Abel Gonzales, who leads a group of scientists to the Amazon, as well as Greenpeace worker Cirri Thompson (the modern-day equivalent of Julie Adams's Kay Lawrence).

CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON: UNIVERSAL/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Matt Rose's fearsome Gill-man head sculpture.


One of Miles Teves's unrealised designs.

Putting the finishing touches on the suit.

Another Teves design, this time more crocodile-like.

A design for Carl Rinsch's also-abandoned take on the creature.

The storyline also introduced an ancient race of amphibious people, of which the Gill-man was the last surviving member. The Phillips script was a decidedly R-rated affair, featuring assorted decapitations, slit throats and ripped-off limbs as the Creature defends his territory.

Once again, Rick Baker was lined up to tackle the effects. "We were actually paid to do the design," he recalls. "I had a number of people in my shop doing maquettes, and we ended up with my design for the head; Matt Rose did the body design, which was beautiful."

But once again, the inevitable studio shenanigans came into play, pushing back an official green light for the film. Carpenter oversaw a rewrite of the script, but Universal ultimately passed, instead offering the director a remake of *Village Of The Damned*. Once again, a new *Creature From The Black Lagoon* was abandoned.

During the mid-'90s, Universal then turned to Peter Jackson, who was directing *The Frighteners* for them, offering him a couple of horror movie projects, including *Creature* and *King Kong*. Jackson opted for the latter, reportedly saying he "didn't get too excited about it" as far as a possible Gill-man project was concerned. Instead, the studio began talking to Ivan Reitman, who commissioned a script rewrite from Herschel Weingrod and Timothy Harris (*Twins*, *Kindergarten Cop*).

Baker was again offered the Creature effects task, but is believed to have turned it down because the new storyline had strayed a bit too far from the original source material. "Their thinking was so different from my thinking that I didn't want to have anything to do with it," he told aintitcool.com in 2012. "They were making it part-dinosaur, part-every fish in the world. It wasn't the Gill-man."

During this period, a number of other creature FX shops were involved with various remake attempts. Bart Mixon remembers bidding on the Weingrod/Harris script on behalf of Mixon & Ellis FX around 1997, although the design maquette was so awful that they only submitted a breakdown based on the blood and gore work. According to Mixon, "They had a design maquette that was horrible; so bad that we decided just to pursue the victim effects, leaving the practical creature design for somebody else to build. I don't think it was done by an effects artist; it was a poor knock-off of Harryhausen's Ymir [from 1957's *20 Million Miles To Earth*] in many ways, so it had a tail, dino legs and an extended neck: basically everything one would not put in a suit! I'm not even sure a shop did it; it may have been generated by an art department.

> **"At one point, the director asked for the creature to be shaped like a giant worm"**

"I think the story took place in Florida. There was a resort hotel development being built, and during the construction, I believe they unearthed an egg that the creature hatched from."

It also appears that the late Greg Cannom may have worked on a version of the Creature during the mid-'90s, commissioning concept artists Miles Teves and John Wheaton to come up with designs. "I wish I could remember more about that remake," reflects Teves, "but I can't even remember the exact year, let alone the director. I do recall at one point, the director asked for the creature to be shaped more like a giant worm. At that point, I knew the project was lost!"

CREATURE OF THE NIGHT

Another unsolicited bid during that period came from Steve Johnson's XFX. "We were doing it on spec," notes Johnson, "as we did on a ton of others." One of his creature designers was former comic book artist Kerry Gammill, →

who claimed in a Facebook post, "The script of the proposed remake was nothing like the original Creature; it was more like a slasher film. The Creature made no sense, and seemed to be a blend of several different sea species."

In fact, the Creature in several Gammill designs resembles a shark more than the original Creature. "I don't remember the designs I did being particularly shark-like," he claims, "except for the idea that the silhouette would be fish-like with the limbs not showing while he swam; they should be part of a reveal later. As I recall, there was some confusion about what was killing people, because he had properties of several different sea animals, including an alligator, octopus etc. I'm pretty sure the fish silhouette and the hidden arms and legs were Steve's idea, not something from the script."

Following the success of *The Mummy* in 1999, Universal was keen to get into the monster business again, and in 2001 they turned to director Gary Ross (*Pleasantville*) to produce a new *Creature* film alongside his dad Arthur A Ross, the original screenwriter on the first and third films.

In 2003, a new script was commissioned by Tedi Sarafian (*Terminator 3: Rise Of The Machines*), but it was a story pitch the previous year by Guillermo del Toro that would someday have the most significance.

> **"He had a wonderful take, making it a period picture, which Universal hated"**

Del Toro pitched a story told from the Gill-man's perspective, focusing on the transgressive relationship between the Creature and Kay Lawrence. Universal (and presumably Ross) were less than enthusiastic about the idea, and passed on it, but del Toro would resurrect the idea years later.

"He had a wonderful take," notes Landis, "making it a period picture, which Universal hated. Lucky for him, he made his own (different but same) version later, called *The Shape Of Water*."

FISHERMAN'S FRIEND

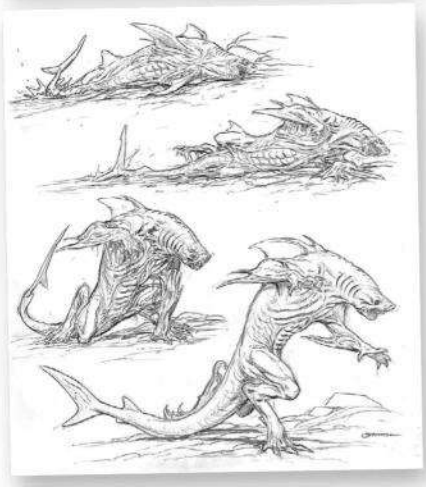
By 2005, Breck Eisner had signed on as *Creature* director, bringing in concept artist Crash McCreery for a new design – quite different from the original – and design studio Spectral Motion to create a maquette.

According to Spectral chief Mike Elizalde, "We had a couple of visits with Breck, who was interested in redefining the creature, making it more as though it crawled out of the Amazonian jungle. The original suit is a beautiful creation, but it was made in the '50s and doesn't have the plausible features or characteristics that would make you believe it was a real, living animal."

"It was an awesome experience, being able to work out Crash's design," continues Dave Grasso, who sculpted the new maquette. "Crash was a huge *Creature* fan, too, and I'm sure he had a lot of struggles with the director and producer wanting it to look a bit more reptilian, with things like the alligator tail elements.

"The one element I was bummed I couldn't do was the big, webbed hands. They wanted him to drop down from trees and grab people. He had to grip the ground on all fours like a crocodile, but could switch up to a bipedal creature. Crash had done a design that looked more like a Galapagos lizard swimming in the water; very streamlined and eel-like, so was always changing from water to land."

Kerry Gammill's design was noticeably more shark-like.



Dave Grasso's fully painted version for Breck Eisner.

Spectral Motion's take was more reptilian.

While Spectral Motion was working with Eisner, other shops were still vying for the job. "I did a set of illustrations on spec," remembers AFX's David Leroy Anderson. "John Wheaton was illustrator, and I thought we were really on to something when I decided the Wolf fish was going to be our source of inspiration. It was terrifying, how it could go from zero to a hundred in a millisecond!"

It's possible that Optic Nerve had pitched Eisner as well. Both Wheaton and Miles Teves recall doing design work for John Vulich in the mid-'00s, but neither has any further details.

Another shop that did some work on a spec basis was Vincent Guastini's VGP Effects.

CONCEPT ARTWORK AND PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY DAVID ANDERSON (AFX), DAVID GRASSO, VINCENT GUASTINI, STEVE JOHNSON (XFX), MILES TEVES, STEVE WANG, DAMON WEATHERS.

It was designed to look like it had crawled out of the Amazon jungle.

The Shape Of Water drew heavily on *Creature* for inspiration.

Jacob Hair's "Pocket Fisherman" design for VGP Effects.

Mike Hill's design made the creature more "attractive".

"There were many different versions," he recalls. "I remember hearing Rob Bottin was going to do it, under the secret code of Pocket Fisherman, which was an in-joke for the old TV commercial [for a Ronco fold-up rod]. As a matter of fact, a friend of mine Mark Alfrey was doing stuff for Rob."

"It was indeed called Pocket Fisherman," confirms Alfrey. "There was an illustrator doing drawings, and I was sculpting a clay figure. I seem to recall we worked on it for a couple of months and then it got shut down. I was working directly for Rob at his Azusa shop, and there was a creature 'bible' he showed us containing the many designs by various artists for different attempts to launch the remake."

"I had just finished *Jay And Silent Bob Strike Back*," Guastini continues, "and Joseph Grossberg, the VFX supervisor, told me he might be working on the new *Creature From The Black Lagoon* and said, 'How would you feel about doing your take on it?' It was a spec thing, but I got word that Breck Eisner said my version was the most faithful.

"I had two sculptors working on maquettes, which were cast up in plastic resin, and I did the paint and finishing work myself. John Wrightson did a full-size version, which was cast in clear resin, with hot glue for the fins and the webbing between the fingers. We put it all together over the course of a year or so, and then Joe kind of disappeared."

In the end, Eisner's version bit the dust as well. Ross had rewritten Sarafian's script, but Eisner had planned to do his own draft. By 2008, he had left the project. "Breck loved our maquette," claims Elizalde, "and even had us make one for his office. We kept checking back, but the project just wasn't able to move forward from a financial standpoint."

Things went quiet for a bit until Carl Rinsch (*47 Ronin*) was attached to the project around 2009, Teves did some further design work – his third foray into *Lagoon* territory – but the project was abandoned.

By 2012, David Kajganich (*Suspiria*) was brought on to write a brand new script, basing his approach on the "'70s-style id-based horror" he grew up with, although a new director failed to materialise. New drafts by Jeff Pinkner and Will Beall followed, but still no director.

WATER JOURNEY

By the mid-decade, Universal had begun making new plans for a Dark Universe franchise, but the box-office failure of *Dracula Untold* and Tom Cruise's remake of *The Mummy* put an end to that – until 2017, that is, when Guillermo del Toro released *The Shape Of Water*, a romantic fantasy about an Amazonian fish-man transported to the US as a lab experiment, where he falls in love with a mute cleaning lady working at the facility. If it sounds familiar, it's awfully close to the pitch Universal rejected a decade and a half earlier.

"Of course he was influenced!" declares the film's creature designer, Mike Hill. "As a kid, he didn't understand why the girl and Creature didn't live happily ever after, so he made it happen."

"We talked about it a lot," agrees Grasso, who del Toro hired to sculpt a key maquette. "He referenced *Creature From The Black Lagoon* a lot, but didn't really want me to go too far in that direction. It was more or less just trying to figure out how to make a fish man look attractive to a girl. You just followed Guillermo's directions and tried to give him exactly what he wants."

The film earned four Oscars, turning veteran suit performer Doug Jones into a reluctant sex symbol, but it still wasn't *Creature From The Black Lagoon*. Rumours of a new reboot continue to circulate, most recently with James Wan at the helm, with a script by Bryan Coyne. "I almost feel Universal would blow it," reflects Wheaton, "so maybe it's best it never happens, but still, with the right director and script it could be amazing, so maybe some day...!"

Creature From The Black Lagoon is available on Blu-ray.

Whoever brings Gill-man back has a tough act to follow.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

JOE HILL

The American author on how Friends inspired The One With A Dragon

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Chad Luibl

SOME INTERVIEWS BEGIN WITH FORMAL introductions. Others simply get going. *SFX*'s meeting with Joe Hill has fallen into the latter category after the writer, full of energy, has bustled into an office at his publishers and just begun talking. This is the point at which there's a fire alarm test. "I am not surprised that at the beginning of our interview we would get a warning about a possible fire breaking out in the building," says Hill dryly. *King Sorrow* is "a very flamey book".

Why is it that? It's because King Sorrow is a dragon. "You can't write about dragons without writing about fire," adds Hill. "I mean, inevitably. They're born in volcanoes. And you know, they do breathe it. Early on in the book, King Sorrow remarks that modern people don't burn the way people in the Middle Ages did. He thinks they smell different; they smell like bacon and maple syrup now when they cook, and he says, 'That's processed sugars for you, mate.'"

As Hill hints here, *King Sorrow* is shot through with dark humour. It's also his most ambitious book to date, an 800-plus-page doorstopper – "Don't drop it on your foot. I won't be held responsible for any broken toes" – structured almost as a series of linked novellas. Hill is a fan of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, "which is wonderful, because you get one book, but you're actually getting six books".

King Sorrow comes into the modern world because he's called up by six friends who want to protect one of their own, Arthur Oakes. He's a young man embarking on an academic career who is forced into the most heinous crime a bibliophile can imagine: stealing rare volumes from the library of the Maine college where he's a trusted figure. "In some ways, I was thinking of, 'What if you did a season of *Friends*, but as a horror movie?'" says Hill.

TEN YEAR PLAN

As to why the book is so complex, it's partly because Hill, having not published a novel since the post-apocalyptic *The Fireman* (2016) – years when he has been best known for comics – wanted to reward patient fans with a book that encompassed "everything that I know how to do about telling stories". He also plans to write a novel every 12 months for the next decade, something that writers he admires, such as "my dad [one Stephen King of Maine], Harlan Coben, Michael Koryta", have done reliably for years. This was a chance to do a longer book before time constraints kicked in.

Then there was the need to impress his best girl. "As it happens, I married one of the finest editors in English publishing, Gillian Redfearn [in 2018], who is the editor of first-class writers like Joe Abercrombie, Patrick Rothfuss and Brandon Sanderson," Hill says. "I knew she wouldn't impress easily, so I really had to go for it."

BIODATA

From **Bangor, Maine, USA**

Greatest Hits
Hill's bestselling novels include *Heart-Shaped Box* (2007), *Horns* (2010) and *NOS4A2* (2013). His comics include *Locke & Key* (2008-13); he also co-wrote the pilot episode of the Netflix adaptation.

Random Fact
Hill is a huge Oasis fan, although when he "folds the laundry", he's usually listening to "classic rock" – "Journey or Boston or Tom Petty".

The duo, who have twin boys – "People talk a lot about how difficult it is to have twins, but they don't talk enough about how much fun it is" – have been through difficult times recently. Redfearn was diagnosed with cancer last year. While "she's doing great, she's totally recovered", Hill says he has to write a screenplay every year because he gets his family's insurance cover via the Writers Guild of America – a reminder that even the most successful people in the USA have to think about health costs. Luckily, he finds screenwriting fun.

BILLY THE KID

That's perhaps not surprising. Hill grew up steeped in the movies, appearing as Billy, a kid who uses a voodoo doll to exert revenge, in George A Romero's *Creepshow* (1982), which was scripted by his father. There was no "on-set babysitter", so he spent a week in the company of prosthetic make-up maestro Tom Savini, "under his workbench, watching him gloriously disfigure movie stars". Many who work bringing nightmares to life, says Hill, turn out to be "really jolly and cheerful and considerate" people that it's easy to be around. "I think it's because they squeeze all the bad thoughts and bad feelings out into the page like pus from a suppurating sore," he says. "Lovely, isn't that lovely?"

Hill hasn't always been so at ease around his own nightmares. In 2010, he went on the road promoting *Horns*. "If you saw me at my events, I think I presented as a funny, relatively relaxed guy who enjoyed the performance." But back at his hotel he would be looking for listening devices, "struggling with paranoid ideation". The kinds of scenarios he invented, he suggests, had turned on him – an intriguing lens through which to view *King Sorrow*.

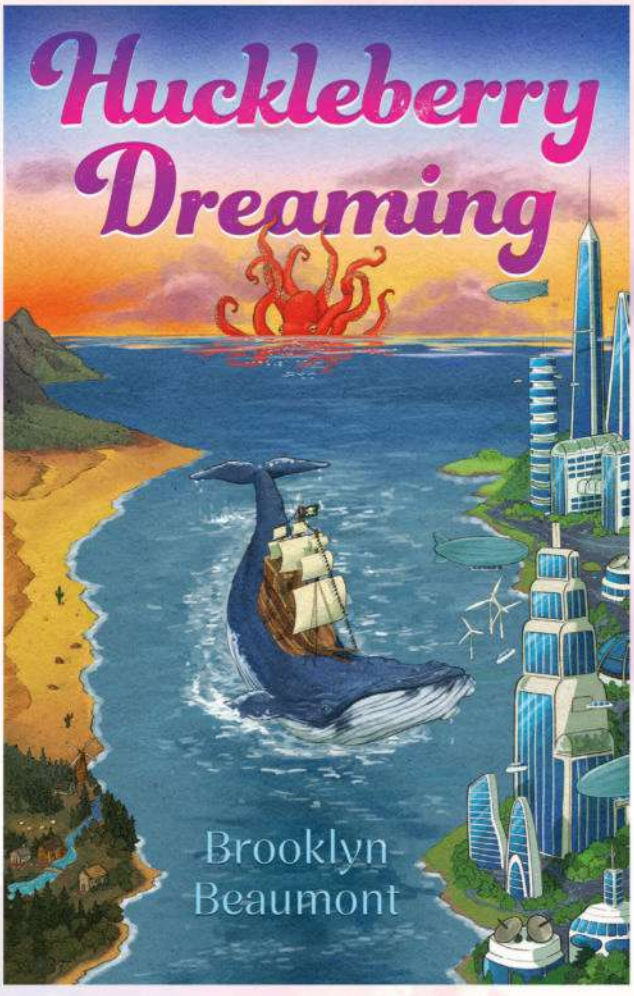
Hill has spent time in therapy. While he has not stopped being the kind of person who, because of OCD, "knows there is a correct way to load the dishwasher, and then all the other ways are wrong", he downplays his struggles with mental health issues. Every year since 2013, he says, things have got better.

Besides, "It's pretty healthy, by the time you're 53, to put aside some of the stuff you were freaking out about when you were in your twenties." Instead, there are new fictional nightmares to share. Joe Hill is looking ahead, not back.

King Sorrow is published by Headline on 21 October.

> You can't write about dragons without writing about fire

What would you give to halt the flow of time?



Brooklyn Beaumont makes a striking debut with *Huckleberry Dreaming*—a genre-bending sci-fi tale where fractured memory and authoritarian control shape a young man's search for truth.

Both unsettling and compelling, it's a coming-of-age story for readers who like their sci-fi bold, brainy, and beautifully off-kilter.

Available now from Troubador Publishing and all leading retailers.

www.huckleberrydreaming.com
ISBN: 9781836283560

NOVEMBER 2025

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edited by Ian Berriman

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HIM

Blood sport

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 96 minutes

Director **Justin Tipping**

Cast **Tyriq Withers, Marlon Wayans, Julia Fox, Tim Heidecker**

It's not hard to see the influence of producer Jordan Peele in this intense, stylised sports-themed horror. It's there in the heightened, socially conscious scares and some of the brain-searing images, like an early shot of an American football spinning upright on one tip. Director/co-writer Justin Tipping has crafted a moody, atmospheric thriller, albeit one that doesn't overdeliver on its early promise.

Him also feels reminiscent of this year's *Opus*, in which a young journalist was sent to profile a reclusive pop star at his desert retreat. Here it's football rather than funky disco music, but once again a fresh-faced outsider is thrust into an isolated superstar-worshipping community, where they quickly realise that something sinister is afoot.

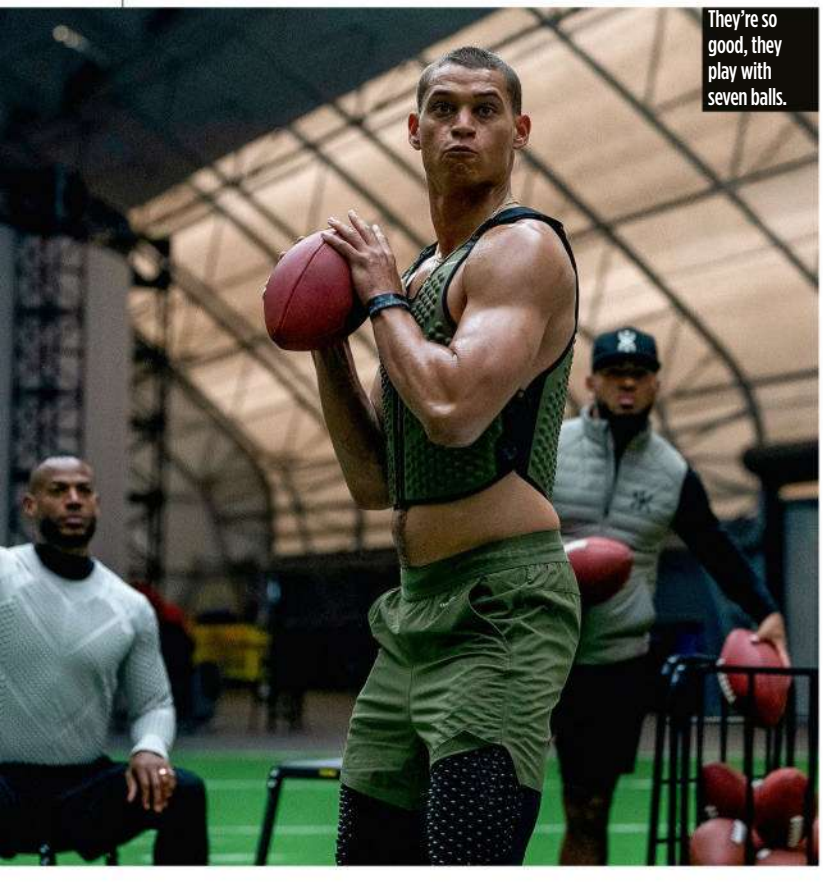
The protege here is Cameron Cade (Tyriq Withers), a promising quarterback who – after being attacked and injured, possibly to a career-destroying degree – is invited to train with his idol Isaiah White (Marlon Wayans). Isaiah has collected eight championship rings since suffering a horrendous leg injury that Cam witnessed on TV as a kid, and is rumoured to be seeking a successor.

Cam's boot camp/initiation/hazing takes place over seven days, which the film divides into chapters, but unlike a lot of creepy cults, which try to ease fresh blood in gently, "Zay" and his acolytes don't make any effort to downplay the retreat's bizarre customs from the get-go; it's all creepy hangers-on, skull-heavy decor and punishing practices. On day one, Cam is stripped, measured and thrown straight into a regime that sees players blasted in the face with pigskins from point-blank range.

The central metaphor is a blunt but effective one. How far would you go to be the GOAT? What are you willing to sacrifice to achieve your dreams (or at least those of your pushiest parent)? You wonder how far removed Cam's experiences are from many real sportspeople who have reached the peak of their profession.

The fusing of sport with horror creates an interesting texture, and it's just one ingredient that makes *Him* consistently engaging. Withers's performance (both physically robust and emotionally agile) is an impressive calling card, and Wayans – still probably best known for the horror-spoofing *Scary Movie* franchise – revels in the opportunity to dial up the charismatic intensity.

The hallucinogenic visuals can be entrancing, with Tipping and cinematographer Kira Kelly demonstrating no shortage of invention: intriguing angles, striking tableaux and crunching X-ray vision.



They're so good, they play with seven balls.

> **"The fusing of sport with horror creates an interesting texture"**

So what holds *Him* back from quite reaching goated status itself? With Cam's whole experience operating in a consistently tense register, it doesn't build like you might expect it to. Yes, there are some third-act revelations and a Grand Guignol showdown, but nothing so profound or surprising as you'd be forgiven for hoping for due to the clear evidence of talent on display.

Him is far from a fumble, but in a year of stronger horror competition, it doesn't quite earn the championship ring.

Matt Maytum

ℹ Wayans has announced his plan to spoof modern greats *Longlegs*, *Get Out*, *Nope* and *Sinners* in *Scary Movie 6*.

GOOD BOY

★★★★☆

RELEASED 10 OCTOBER

15 | 72 minutes

Director **Ben Leonberg**

Cast **Indy, Shane Jensen, Arielle Friedman, Larry Fessenden**

Forget Leo in *One Battle After Another* or Timothée in *Marty Supreme*, next year's Oscar for Best Actor should go to Indy, the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever belonging to first-time director Ben Leonberg, who owns every scene of *Good Boy*.

Indy accompanies his on-screen owner Todd (Shane Jensen) to the rural house left by Todd's deceased grandfather (Larry Fessenden). Our furry hero is, naturally, a good boy, but he's also a scared boy because his beloved Todd is clearly ill, and his keen senses detect an ominous presence in the house.

With every shot containing Indy or presenting his POV, *Good Boy* has a USP that could become gimmicky were it not for the suffocating atmosphere conjured by Leonberg. The visuals darken and the sound design becomes increasingly oppressive as Todd's condition worsens and the ghostly presence/demonic force intensifies. Eventually the action plays out in lashing rain to the chug of a generator, Todd's laboured breathing and the bass pulse of Sam Boase-Miller's insistent score.

Good Boy's favouring of shadows emanating from bleak corners of rooms evokes Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Kairo*, while it ultimately emerges as a heart-breaking tale of a loyal hound. Think a J-horror remix of Lasse Hallström's *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*. **Jamie Graham**

THE CONJURING: LAST RITES

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 135 minutes
Director **Michael Chaves**
Cast **Vera Farmiga, Patrick Wilson, Mia Tomlinson, Ben Hardy**

Old demons come home to roost in the fourth and ostensibly final *Conjuring*, a send-off of sorts for paranormal sleuths Ed and Louise Warren (Patrick Wilson, Vera Farmiga) that suggests it'll be their daughter Judy (Mia Tomlinson) and her partner Tony (Ben Hardy) who'll take the franchise on from here.

Before they are put out to pasture, though, the Warrens have one more family to aid: a three-generation Pennsylvanian clan that appears to have inherited a haunted mirror Ed and Lorraine were investigating around the time of Judy's birth.

Gruesome hangings, sinks full of blood and a ghostly crone reminiscent of *Weapons*' Aunt Gladys make for a spooky saunter down Poltergeist Lane, with cameos from menacing doll Annabelle and some familiar old faces augmenting the overall sense of closure.

That it takes more than an hour for the Warrens to come to the persecuted Smurls' rescue rather tests the patience, however, as does director Michael Chaves's slavish reliance on hoary jump scares and shameless *Exorcist* steals.

"Something feels different!" mutters Ed as *Last Rites* starts towards its climax. Twelve years on though, it is wishful thinking to expect anything out of the ordinary from a series that, like its two protagonists, has seen better days. **Neil Smith**

A BIG BOLD BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY

Road trippy

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 109 minutes
Director **Kogonada**
Cast **Colin Farrell, Margot Robbie, Kevin Kline, Phoebe Waller-Bridge**

It's surely intentionally ironic that a film about reluctant participants on a life-affirming quest should have an off-putting title requiring a leap of faith. Maybe the garish name is there as a filter for the cynics who'll struggle to get on board with the unique rhythms and artificial style of director Kogonada's often dreamy romantic fantasy.

If there's a part of you that's susceptible to going on an enriching ride, you're in the same boat as David (Colin Farrell, reuniting with his *After Yang* director). Hiring a rental car from a whimsical outlet, he ends up following the simple, retro-styled satnav on the titular experience, which he ends up taking with Sarah (Margot Robbie). They don't exactly hit it off immediately, though there's a winning chemistry between the sometime DC villains, whose movie-star magnetism really helps sell Kogonada's ambitious swings.

With lightly handled magical realism, the duo go through various standalone doors that are portals into pivotal moments in their lives: high-school musicals, hospital arrivals and departures, and more. In these interactive therapy sessions, they relive and share traumatic moments from their pasts, though the film's frequently funnier than this makes it sound.

A Big Bold Beautiful Journey will be divisive, and the leisurely pace will be a problem for some, but there's much to admire in its controlled tonal balance, from the vivid lighting to the thought-provoking scenarios, and the jaunty but not cloying score. Go with it and it does live up to the adjectives of its title. **Matt Maytum**

i The satnav system guiding the couple is voiced by Jodie Turner-Smith, who played Colin Farrell's wife in *After Yang*.

THE STRANGERS: CHAPTER 2

★★★☆☆

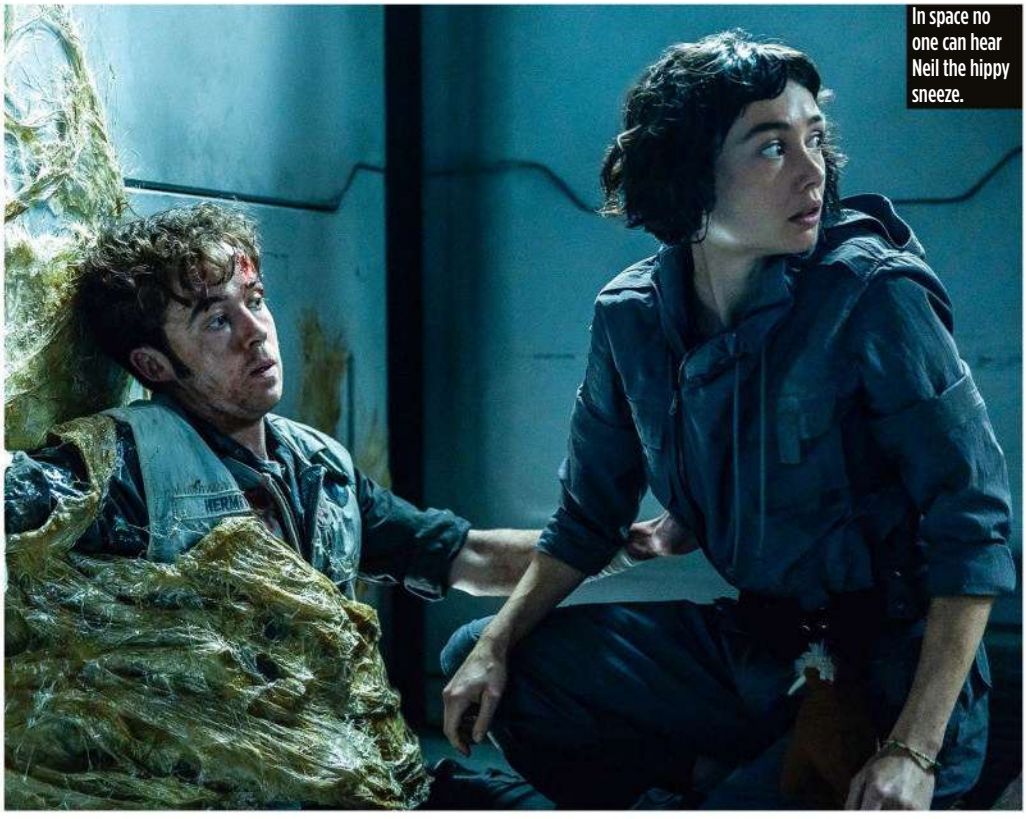
RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 98 minutes
Director **Renny Harlin**
Cast **Madelaine Petsch, Gabriel Basso, Richard Brake**

Filmed back-to-back with last year's *Chapter 1* and a soon-to-be-released *Chapter 3*, *The Strangers: Chapter 2* is both the second film in a trilogy and the fourth film in a franchise that began in 2008 with Bryan Bertino's original.

Renny Harlin more or less remade that film last time out, which at least permits him to tinker with the formula this time around. Despite a creepy interlude in a hospital morgue and some autovehicular action, however, the claustrophobic intimacy of its housebound predecessors is inevitably sacrificed by transplanting the mayhem to a variety of locales.

It also means the series' trio of masked serial killers have to acquire almost superhuman levels of intuition and invincibility as they stalk plucky survivor Maya (Madelaine Petsch) through the backwater Oregon hamlet she's become marooned in. They do get some help, though, from a four-legged predator whose surprise intervention risks plunging an already rickety enterprise into titter-inducing absurdity.

Flashbacks to the murderers' embryonic exploits in the playground add some texture, as do scenes involving the town's possibly complicit natives. Throughout, though, you can't help sensing that a satisfyingly finite thriller has been stretched beyond its elasticity. **Neil Smith**



In space no one can hear Neil the hippy sneeze.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **Kavalier reads a passage from *Peter Pan*.**
- **We see a clip of an old Disney movie.**
- **A hazmat-suited worker is scrubbing mould from the walls.**

- **You can see a shower of sparks, a jet of steam, or some dangling chains.**
- **Wendy replicates xenomorph clicks and whistles.**
- **Cyborg Morrow extrudes a blade from his hand.**
- **A bunch of anonymous soldiers are slaughtered.**

ALIEN: EARTH Season One

The Peter Pan principals

★★★★☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Creator **Noah Hawley**

Cast **Sydney Chandler, Alex Lawther, Essie Davis, Samuel Blenkin, Babou Ceesay, Adarsh Gourav**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **After nine** theatrical outings, one fundamental issue facing anyone adding to the *Alien* franchise is how much to focus on the titular creatures. Do you restrict them, for the most part, to the shadows? And if you do that, what do you place in the foreground?

Alien: Earth creator Noah Hawley isn't shy of taking an expansive approach. Here, the xenomorphs are just one piece of a puzzle which includes four other deadly lifeforms; Prodigy, a new conglomerate in competition with Weyland-Yutani; a cyborg (alongside the usual androids); and something new – a group of "hybrids" created by downloading dying children's consciousnesses into synthetic bodies.

Though it's pleasing to see more details of their life cycle (and the possibility of communicating with them is intriguing), the xenos can feel crowded out of the picture, and you may find yourself bridling out of a sense of protectiveness.

By the end, you may even worry they are losing their dignity by becoming *domesticated*. But the results are mostly successful. Hawley's menagerie of samples – brought to Earth when a research vessel crashes – are fascinating grotesques, with a roving eyeball that can possess a host stealing the show – never has a sheep been so creepy. And Babou Ceesay's intense performance as ruthless security officer Morrow mostly stifles the giggles ensuing from the fact that he's part man, part Swiss Army knife.

> **"Never has a sheep been so creepy"**

As for the kids? The constant Peter Pan allusions are a tad corny. And the existential questions raised as they grapple with their nature feel rather old hat. But you have to doff that titfer to the way the likes of Adarsh Gourav and Jonathan Ajayi embody the restless physicality of children – even if on occasion it feels like watching a drama school exercise.

It has to be said that there's an exasperating amount of brainless behaviour across these eight episodes. Much of this – like the wisdom of sending 11- and 12-year-olds to a traumatising crash site – can be put down to the ADHD-informed impulsiveness of Prodigy trillionaire Boy Kavalier (Samuel Blenkin).

But you'd have thought it might have occurred to someone that creating a hybrid is like handing a child a rocket launcher – or that leaving one alone with access codes to the creatures' cells is a bad idea. And don't get us started on Morrow's moronic plan for recovering a xeno from Kavalier's island base...

Still, stupidity is something we're accustomed to seeing in horror, and it doesn't diminish how beautifully realised a series this is: impressively kinetic when it shifts into an action gear, wince-inducingly unpleasant when it gorges on body horror, and – thanks to its artful use of gauzy montage – woozily dream-like when it drifts into a more contemplative mode.

Ian Berriman

i Hawley named the ship after the defences built by the French in the '30s: "The Maginot Line is the hubris of infallibility."

ISOLATED

Finn Families Woebegone

★★½☆☆

UK **Channel 4, streaming now**

Creators **Lassi Vierikko, Petja Lähde**

Cast **Elena Leeve, Ville Virtanen, Turkka Mastomäki, Pihla Viitala**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **It's been 14 years** since Danish crime drama *Forbrydelsen*, aka *The Killing*, brought the term "Scandi noir" to British vocabularies. Since then, many other European shows have honed in on its gloomy vibes but added a supernatural twist – Germany's *Dark*, for example, or Iceland's *Katla*. Even Sky tried it with Arctic-set tripe *Fortitude*.

After 2015's excellent forest fantasy *Jordskott*, Finland now brings us *Utö* (rechristened *Isolated* for its release under Channel 4's Walter Presents banner). It's set on the titular remote island in the Baltic Sea, home to an array of hardy types who are all going through tricky times (divorce, mental illness, looming bankruptcy). But their paltry human concerns fall by the wayside when a screeching magnetic pulse hits the island, not only hurting people's ears but also scaring away birds, fish and rats.

Afterwards, every electrical item is dead. An attempt to sail to the mainland fails. Food and water are running out. Has Russia used a new weapon on them? Is this supernatural? Is it the end of the world as they know it?

There are pleasing *Lost* and *Lord Of The Flies* homages going on here, and just enough creepy mystery to keep casual viewers intrigued – though hardened *SFX* readers may twig some of the spooky tropes before they happen. However, even before catastrophe befalls the island, its residents are sulky, tearful and dour. With the exception of a quip about anal probes in the first episode, nobody smiles or laughs. Misery heaps on misery. The weeping is off the freakin' charts.

> **"Misery heaps on misery. The weeping is off the freakin' charts"**

Never has the phrase "It's grim up north" been truer.

And the upshot of every character having a face like a slapped arse for eight hours of TV? While you may find their overall plight interesting, you won't care if they live or die. It's a bloody shame, as this could have been a new Nordic noir classic. Instead, think Nordic *blah*. **Jayne Nelson**

i In 1994, the MS Estonia ferry sank; 852 people sadly died. Many bodies were taken to Utö, inspiring elements of this show.

INVASION Season Three

Bore Of The Worlds

★★☆☆☆

UK/US **Apple+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Simon Kinberg**

Cast **Golshifteh Farahani, Shamier Anderson, Shioli Kutsuna, Shane Zaza**

EPISODES 3.01-3.10 **The alien** invasion grinds on as glacially as ever in TV sci-fi's equivalent of a cricket test match between a team of Antony Gormley sculptures and the Terracotta Army.

Season three opens two years on from Earth having brought down the invaders' mothership, and it's been a period of relative peace. But those pesky aliens haven't given up, and the brains behind the invasion are preparing to enter the fray.

Yep, new season, another new breed of alien. But their MO remains the same: leak heavy, psychic hints to "in-tune" humans to give the home team a sporting chance. Presumably the show's writers have a coherent explanation for the aliens' inscrutable battle plans, but at this point we wouldn't be surprised if the end-of-series reveal is that they're subjecting humanity to a *Traitors*-style reality game show.

The aliens open their portals again and huge tentacles emerge, supercharging the hunter-killers. The humans fight back by planning to bomb the mothership. And a loony religious cult devoted to saving the aliens causes all sorts of grief.

All of which sounds far more exciting than the show actually is. Because mostly it's just characters endlessly analysing, interrogating, bickering with and comforting each other, all the while skirting around the questions the audience actually wants answering. There are too many repetitive scenes of characters rehashing the same points, an extended but ultimately pointless flashback to the cult's origins, and an *Enemy Mine*-style episode that plods through all the usual enemies-become-frenemies tropes. The cartoony CG effects often feel at odds with the show's otherwise dour approach, but at least they add some fun.

The show is superbly acted, has a handful of characters who you actually care about, and occasionally serves up a well-directed, visually pleasing set-piece or shocking twist. But ultimately *Invasion* is still a lot of corny old SF hokum with a mind-bogglingly inflated sense of its own self-importance.

Dave Golder

"See them aliens are back, then." "Yep." "Bummer."

i The apex alien design was influenced by amoeba, jellyfish, insects, blowfish and sub-Saharan animals, says Simon Kinberg.

LEGO STAR WARS: REBUILD THE GALAXY – PIECES OF THE PAST

★★★★☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Showrunners **Dan Hernandez, Benji Samit**

Cast **Gaten Matarazzo, Tony Revolori, Marsai Martin, Dan Stevens**

EPISODES 2.01-2.04 **A *Star Wars***

sequel that's smarter, more ambitious and – dare we say it – darker than its predecessor? This entertaining follow-up to last year's *Rebuild The Galaxy* borrows from the long-established *The Empire Strikes Back* instruction booklet, without ever forgetting that playing with Lego is supposed to be fun.

Feuding brothers Sig (*Stranger Things*' Gaten Matarazzo) and Dev (*Spider-Man*'s Tony Revolori) are back in a totally reinvented *Star Wars* galaxy, where goodies are baddies, baddies are goodies, and the Millennium Falcon comes in a stylish shade of black. This time, however, the evil Solitus (a scenery-chewing Dan Stevens) is hoping to find peace and quiet by consigning the entire galaxy to oblivion.

With higher stakes and better gags, this fast-paced adventure is a finely tuned spoof machine, packed full of deep cuts that go very deep indeed. Franchise legends Mark Hamill, Anthony Daniels and Billy Dee Williams relish their reinvented roles, and although the series is essentially an unashamed toy advert, you probably wanted that epic new 9,023-piece Death Star set anyway. **Richard Edwards**

At least none of them demanded a Waldorf salad.

HAUNTED HOTEL Season One

Extra spirits in the mini bar

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Showrunner **Matt Roller**

Cast **Eliza Coupe, Skyler Gisondo, Will Forte, Jimmi Simpson**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **To paraphrase**

the Eagles, "Welcome to the Hotel Undervale – you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave." They may have been singing metaphorically, but at the Undervale the ghostly residents can literally never leave.

Haunted Hotel is an animated comedy created by Matt Roller, who's written for cult cartoon hits like *Archer* and *Rick And Morty*. When single mum Katherine's brother Nathan dies, she inherits his spook-infested property and moves in with her neurotic teenage son Ben and supernatural-obsessed daughter Esther.

Attracting breathing guests proves difficult, even with ghost-Nathan hanging around – not that he's much help with the DIY now, being all non-corporeal. But he does know hospitality and is a vital bridge between the dead and the living. Esther's happy. She's found a demon-obsessed boy from the 18th century to play with, while Ben's fallen for a phantom flapper from the '20s.

Think *Ghosts* combined with some amped-up *Buffy*-style action plots (most episodes end with troublesome ghosts wreaking havoc). There are a bunch of great recurring supporting character ghosts (especially Stabby Paul), running gags and horror-themed Easter eggs, and the details of the ghost lore are great fun.

But while *Haunted Hotel* is decent enough entertaining fluff, it lacks the comedy edge and perverse quirkiness of the best adult animated hits. The humour doesn't bite so much as nibble – it often feels more like a kids' cartoon that's just learnt what toilet humour is. **Dave Golder**

i The name Undervale is a riff on *The Shining*'s Overlook Hotel, and a familiar tricycle makes a brief appearance.

MARVEL ZOMBIES

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Showrunners **Bryan Andrews, Zeb Wells**

Cast **Iman Vellani, Dominique Thorne, Hailee Steinfeld, David Harbour**

EPISODES 1.01-1.04 **The latest**

Marvel animated series to slink onto Disney+ with minimal fanfare is this four-episode take on Robert Kirkman's comic series. Following on from 2021's *What If...?* episode "What If... Zombies?!", the show drops us straight into a dystopian parallel world where the familiar Marvel heroes are outnumbered by hordes of flesh-munching undead.

Our guide to this dangerous world is Kamala Khan (Iman Vellani), surviving with the help of Ironheart/Riri Williams (Dominique Thorne) and Hawkeye/Kate Bishop (Hailee Steinfeld). When the gang stumble upon an old SHIELD base they begin a journey that may bring an end to the zombie plague once and for all. Along the way they meet a succession of familiar characters like Shang-Chi (Simu Liu) and remixed heroes like Blade Knight (Todd Williams).

The cast is genuinely impressive, with most of the characters voiced by their live-action counterparts. Too often, though, *Marvel Zombies* simply feels like a succession of fight scenes and cameos – by the time Zombie Thanos shows up you'll be punch-drunk from the endless references. Still, the 3D animation is dynamic and the show isn't afraid to play rough with its heroes, before a suitably creepy and ambiguous finale leaves the door open for more. **Will Salmon**

FOUNDATION Season Three
End of Empire

★★★★½

UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now**
Showrunner **David S Goyer**
Cast **Jared Harris, Lou Llobell, Lee Pace, Pilou Asbæk**

EPISODES 3.01-3.10 **Spanning** hundreds of years, with an ever-shifting cast of characters, *Foundation* may be the most ambitious show on TV. Pulling from Isaac Asimov's novels (with this season drawing from 1952's *Foundation And Empire* and 1953's *Second Foundation*), it's proof that hard SF can work onscreen, given enough time and money.

It's 152 years after the events of season two, and the Empire is a shadow of its former self, while the Foundation now controls hundreds of planets. The Third Crisis predicted by Hari Seldon (Jared Harris) is rapidly approaching, however, and with it comes a new threat that could wipe out humanity. Complicating matters further is the Mule (Pilou Asbæk), a mutant whose moves to seize control of the galaxy will change everything.

The Mule is key to a season that has stepped up its action quotient. He struts onto the screen in episode one and table-flips the show's status quo, willing an entire army to turn on itself and leading to some uneasy alliances and a genuinely surprising final episode twist that significantly diverges from the books.

Meanwhile, Lee Pace's Brother Day continues to be one of the most interesting roles on TV. The tyrannical despot of the past has been redefined here (in his 24th incarnation) as a philosophical drug addict playboy. The complex relationship between Day and his clone brothers Dawn (Cassian Bilton) and Dusk (Terrence Mann) is a singularly strange character dynamic, and one that sometimes makes the "goodies" (like Lou Llobell's Gaal Dornick) seem rather strait-laced in comparison.

> **"This is a show that has become essential viewing for SF fans"**

This is an outstanding season from a show that has become essential viewing for SF fans. Its story of rising and falling empires is richly told, and its sense of scale is unmatched. The already-confirmed fourth season can't come soon enough. **Will Salmon**

Vest by River Island, £25. Chains: model's own.

i *Fear The Walking Dead*'s Ian Goldberg has replaced David S Goyer as *Foundation*'s showrunner for the season four.

WEDNESDAY Season Two
It's ooky to be kooky

★★★★☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
Showrunners **Alfred Gough, Miles Millar**
Cast **Jenna Ortega, Steve Buscemi, Billie Piper, Gwendoline Christie**

EPISODES 2.01-2.08 **Wednesday** Addams has had the perfect summer break, tracking down, baiting, and then scalping the Kansas City Scalper serial killer. But now she has to return to the Nevermore Academy under the worst possible circumstances: after the climatic events of season one, she's suddenly the most popular kid in school. And she loathes it. Some would call it evolution. "I don't evolve, I cocoon," she tells bestie (not that she'd ever use the term) Edith.

It's a blisteringly confident opening to the season: a quirky, visually witty, gloriously perverse statement of intent. The season that follows delivers on the promise. This twisted high school drama may not have the shock of the new any more, but there's no sign that season one used up all the best gags.

Jenna Ortega is in fine form delivering Wednesday's spine-dissolving stares and dour anti-zingers ("If you can't kill them with kindness there's always lethal injection"). Steve Buscemi as Nevermore's suspiciously over-excitable Principal Dort and Billie Piper as enigmatic music teacher Isadora Capri provide just two new mysteries among a plethora of fresh ongoing plots (Werewolves! Hydes! Creepy cults! Premonitions!) that culminate in three episodes that all feel like season finales.

There's more for the other members of the Addams clan to do, including an unexpected dive into Thing's origins and a secret career for Morticia. The writers also tease the Wednesday/Edith shippers mercilessly in the second half of the season. But best of all is Wednesday's new invisible stalker Agnes (Evie Templeton), who you'll loathe at first, but want to hug by the climax. Former principal Weems (Gwendoline Christie) returns in an unexpected capacity, and Joanna Lumley plays magnificently against type as Morticia's overbearing mother.

The series also looks magnificent, wearing its Tim Burton aesthetics with pride. And why not? *The Addams Family* and Tim Burton go together like Burke and Hare. **Dave Golder**

Wednesday gleefully enjoys a slumber party.

i All the episode titles contain the word "woe" because, as the nursery rhyme says, "Wednesday's child is full of woe".

DOCTOR WHO Season 13

SFX Loves

Real horrorshow

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 20 OCTOBER

1975-1976 | 12 | Blu-ray

Producer **Philip Hinchcliffe**

Cast **Tom Baker, Elisabeth Sladen, Ian Marter, Nicholas Courtney**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Talk of golden ages** always feels perilous, but for many this remains the platonic ideal of *Doctor Who*: Tom Baker in his mesmerisingly alien pomp, paired with Elisabeth Sladen's adorably human Sarah, in adventures that steal from classic horror to deliver shudders with a gothic touch.

Pitting the Time Lord against Nessie, "Terror Of The Zygons" is a final dismantling of the Pertwee years. The military muscle of UNIT features in two more stories this season – "The Android Invasion" and hard-edged finale "The Seeds Of Doom" – but this sounds the Last Post for the Brigadier as a semi-regular.

Plundering 1956's *Forbidden Planet* for inspiration, the chilling "Planet Of Evil" hurls the TARDIS into another universe altogether. "Pyamids Of Mars", meanwhile, is an atmospheric, richly entertaining brew of Hammer and Erich von Däniken.

If the source material is all too visible in the *Frankenstein*-indebted "The Brain Of Morbius", it doesn't matter. Together these glorious stories make a pretty persuasive argument that *Doctor Who* is at its best when its influences are showing.

Extras Producer Philip Hinchcliffe reflects on season 13 in the company of Toby Hadoke and members of cast and crew; revisiting some classic locations, this is an enjoyably informal time trip (57 minutes). A tribute to companion actor Ian Marter proves a rather more melancholy watch, but with contributions from family and friends it unpicks a complicated, prematurely curtailed life with impressive sensitivity (77 minutes).

Veteran director Graeme Harper receives the showcase interview treatment, revealing as much about the changing face of TV as his own career (83 minutes), while Tom Baker takes on topics inspired by this season's stories (36 minutes). He's on characteristically amusing form but mortality is clearly weighing on his mind more than ever – "I don't want to die; it's so selfish of me, but there you are...".

A featurette goes behind the scenes of new but sympathetically retro model effects for "Zygons" (11 minutes). Elisabeth Sladen offers some great insights into "Pyramids" in a 2003 interview (12 minutes), paired with the memories of co-star Michael Sheard (13 minutes). There's also a mischievous con panel with Sladen, Caroline John and Nicholas Courtney (40 minutes).

Along with three welcome new audio commentaries by Baker, each story gets a dedicated "Behind The Sofa" feature (averaging 37 minutes) with assorted *Who* stars, and there's another overlong escape room game (75 minutes).

Fourteen newly excavated archival treasures include four weirdly charming Dr Where adventures from *Mathshow*, the BBC Schools programme that spoofed imperial-phase *Who* while trading in concepts that wouldn't have disgraced Christopher Bidmead's era (33 minutes). Plus: omnibus editions for "Pyramids", "Morbius" and "Seeds"; galleries; trails; PDF materials; original DVD extras. **Nick Setchfield**

When you've gotta dance, you've just gotta dance.

i The opening of episode one of "The Brain Of Morbius" features a Mutt costume from Jon Pertwee tale "The Mutants".

UNCLE SAM

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 13 OCTOBER

1996 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **William Lustig**

Cast **David Fralick, Christopher Ogden, Leslie Neale, Bo Hopkins**

The *Maniac Cop* team of director William Lustig and writer Larry Cohen united once again for this sledgehammer-subtle satirical horror, which plays with the iconography of the titular personification of the USA.

The remains of soldier Sam Harper, killed by friendly fire, are belatedly found in the Kuwaiti desert and returned to his wife. His charred revenant then dons a stolen costume for a Fourth of July killing spree.

It doesn't quite hang together. Sam's motivations are muddy – he punishes flag-burners and their ilk, but also, in one baffling subplot, vows to avenge a boy burned by fireworks. The pacing is low-energy. And for an 18 it feels surprisingly tame.

Still, not many US horrors paint such an unrelentingly cynical portrait of society. Sam is revealed to have been an abuser. The sergeant who informs his wife took the job to screw widows. And in a speech, Isaac Hayes's disabled vet dismantles the whole notion of wartime heroism. Today, *Uncle Sam* would be blasted as un-American leftist propaganda – that alone makes it interesting.

Extras 88 Films reheat some old stuff. Two commentaries pair Lustig with Cohen/Hayes. The stunt coordinator talks over behind-the-scenes footage of fire sequences (10 minutes). Plus: two takes of a deleted scene; a nudge-nudge montage of double-entendres; trailer; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

BAD CHANNELS

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 13 OCTOBER

1992 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Ted Nicolaou**

Cast **Paul Hipp, Martha Quinn, Aaron Lustig, Ian Patrick Williams**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Another month,** another reminder that while the odd gem emerged from Charles Band's Full Moon stable, so did plenty of crud.

Centred on a small town radio station, *Bad Channels* does deliver a memorable alien and its robot sidekick – even if it looks like the budget was about £50. After caking KDUL in green fungus, the pair kidnap young women via the airwaves.

They end up miniaturised in jars. God knows why – maybe this odd couple watched *Bride Of Frankenstein* and decided to copy Dr Pretorius. Said abductions involve listeners imagining themselves in music videos: cue performances by three tiresome LA rock bands.

The film strives to project a likeable goofiness, but the corners of your mouth are unlikely to twitch upwards. A movie this short (credits roll at 67 minutes) shouldn't outstay its welcome, but chances are you'll tune out long before then.

Extras This 88 Films edition has three fresh bonuses: an interview with director Ted Nicolau (28 minutes), a Nicolau-focused commentary by a duo from horror site *The Schlock Pit*, and a second track by the director.

An archival Making Of (11 minutes) is presented twice, with variant framing. An old Nicolau interview (19 minutes) is funnier than the film, thanks to the bangs, crashes and hums that constantly interrupt it. Plus: trailer. **Calvin Baxter**

IN MY SKIN

Cut and taste

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2002 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Marina de Van**

Cast **Marina de Van, Laurent Lucas, Léa Drucker**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Label Radiance** describes *In The Skin* as "body horror", and "part of the New French Extremity movement". Director Marina de Van would beg to differ. You can see why. Though liable to have viewers watching through their fingers, it's more of a psychological portrait.

De Van herself plays Esther, whose life is pretty banal: boring marketing job; unremarkable boyfriend. One night she trips and badly cuts her leg, awakening a compulsion to self-harm. This is more than your average razor-slashing, with Esher biting off small chunks of flesh, and even slicing off skin and tanning it.

De Van's argument that this isn't a horror is strengthened by how much further she could have gone with gruesome prosthetics. But the sensuous pleasure Esther draws from her comparatively discreet self-mutilation is uncomfortable viewing as it is.

A restaurant scene gets to the nub, with Esther's alienation from her body expressed through the sight of her arm lying on the table, cleanly detached – the surreal highlight of this grimly fascinating auto-cannibalistic *Repulsion*.

Extras In a candid interview, de Van emphasises how the film draws on her own experiences. (26 minutes). DoP Pierre Barougier (22 minutes) describes entering the director's headspace rather like a man who's visited a strange planet. A chat with de Van's acting coach proves rather long-winded (20 minutes). Critic Manuela Lazic provides an appreciation (12 minutes); a visual essay supplies the now requisite academic posing (11 minutes).

Two de Van shorts are similarly transgressive. In "Bien Sous Tous Rapports" (12 minutes), parents critique their daughter's oral sex technique – it's all very Luis Buñuel's *The Phantom Of Liberty*. "Rétention" (15 minutes) involves much straining on toilets. Plus: a 2004 director's commentary; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i The crew were so convinced the "detached arm" scene was a disastrous mistake that they temporarily went on strike.

GORGO

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1961 | PG | 4K

Director **Eugène Lourié**

Cast **Bill Travers, William Sylvester, Vincent Winter, Christopher Rhodes**

A British take on a kaiju flick, *Gorgo* unleashes a scaly Suitmation monster on London.

It plunders as much from *King Kong* as *Godzilla*: disturbed by a volcanic eruption off the coast of Ireland, an oversized prehistoric critter is captured, chained and exhibited as the Eighth Wonder of the World – albeit in Battersea Park, not Broadway. But an amusing twist finds an even larger, even stompier beast descending on the Big Smoke to free her child. Where were you, Mama Kong?

Eugène Lourié had form when it came to rampaging marine life, having helmed *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) and *Behemoth The Sea Monster* (1959). While he brings a heady, mist-drenched atmosphere to the coastal scenes, the film truly rallies for the final carnage.

It's an impressive spectacle, marshalling the combined might of the Army, Navy and RAF as swarms of panicking extras flee the creature's onslaught. You might even detect the metaphorical shadow of the Blitz, though the Luftwaffe never managed to decapitate Big Ben...

Extras A 2013 documentary places the film in its monster movie context (31 minutes). There's also a restoration featurette. Plus: two "video comics"; galleries of publicity material and merchandise; production notes; trailer; poster; 24-page comic book. **Nick Setchfield**

NOSFERATU THE VAMPYRE

Hideous Kinski

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1979 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director Werner Herzog

Cast Klaus Kinski, Isabelle Adjani, Bruno Ganz, Roland Topor

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Set beside the epic** gothic splendour of Robert Eggers's revival, this '70s take on FW Murnau's 1922 expressionist classic feels rather low-key.

Werner Herzog considers that the apogee of German cinema, and his approach to the material is suitably respectful. Dipping a toe into genre for the first time, he plays by the rules – a scene where inn-goers react to mention of Dracula is such a classic take on the trope, it prompts a guffaw.

But he makes numerous changes too. With copyright no longer an issue, Herzog reverts to the names Murnau filed off his cash-in on Bram Stoker's novel. He reinstates a sailing ship as the means by which the Count's crates of earth are transported, expands Jonathan Harker's journey – with stunning scenery complemented by Popol Vuh's pretty score – and adds a darkly ironic final twist.

But the big change here is the approach to the vampire. Herzog's bloodsucker retains the rat-like teeth and oversized ears of Max Schreck's Orlok, but cuts a lonely figure, weary of immortality, and Klaus Kinski pulls off making him a somewhat sympathetic figure. Doubly impressive, arguably, given that the actor himself was such a horrible bastard.

Extras Best place to start with this BFI release is a surprisingly good 1979 Making Of that offers plenty of glimpses behind-the-scenes on location. A new video essay (15 minutes) centres on the copyright issues surrounding the tale. Herzog discusses his career in a 2016 BFI Q&A (69 minutes). There are two old commentaries with the director – one English, one German, both well-moderated and instructive. These play over Herzog's preferred German-language version, but you are free to choose the English one (shot at the same time). Plus: a brief Mark Kermode intro; behind-the-scenes heavy gallery; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ Herzog cast French artist/writer Roland Topor as Renfield after seeing him on French TV and being struck by his laugh.

DEVIL IN THE DUST

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 18 | Digital/DVD (13 October)

Guy Peace toplines this supernaturally-tinged, often brutally dark Western. His ether-sniffing sawbones escorts a freed slave on the journey to a preacher she hopes can cure her daughter's deadly touch.

It's a film of big skies, tense stand-offs, and quirky characterisation: a "halfwit" farm boy who's forever babbling and a well-spoken Native American by the name of William Shakespeare both impress. But ultimately the girl's mysterious power feels like merely a hollow MacGuffin.

Extras None. **Ian Berriman**

SANE INSIDE INSANITY

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | Digital

***Rocky Horror*, the world's** cultiest movie, gets another 50th anniversary doc, following the Richard O'Brien-focused *Strange Journey*. He's nowhere to be seen here, but an impressive array of talking-head talent makes up for that.

It's very much a warts 'n' all exploration: these filmmakers tackle everything, including who got all the movie money. Meanwhile fans from around the world melt hearts as they show what *Rocky Horror* means to them. **Jayne Nelson**

SCURRY

★½☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Digital

A man wakes up in a sinkhole with a piece of glass sticking out of his guts... and his day only gets worse from there.

Scurry is a super-low-budget creature feature – for most of the runtime, it's just two actors talking in the dark – which means it's the kind of film that lives or dies on its script and performances. Unfortunately, both are barely mediocre.

Throw in some super-cheap CG effects and an eye-roller of an ending and you've basically got *Cloverfield*, if everything about it was infinitely worse. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE ASTRONAUT

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Digital

Surviving a near-fatal mission disaster, an astronaut (Kate Mara) finds herself experiencing disturbing phenomena. Locked down in a government safehouse, she begins to wonder if the true threat is inside or outside...

Mara makes an appealingly resilient heroine, and this often tense thriller holds its mystery for much of its runtime. But as it riffs on everything from *The Quatermass Experiment* to *The Fly* to *Halloween* it never quite commits to its own identity. A brazenly Spielbergian climax feels pure karaoke. **Nick Setchfield**

THE PERFUME OF THE LADY IN BLACK

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1974 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Francesco Barilli**

Cast **Mimsy Farmer, Maurizio Bonuglia, Mario Scaccia, Jho Jenkins**

Though generally described as a giallo, this strange kettle of fish is such a deranged example that it pushes the limits of the genre to the brink of explosion.

Melding *Rosemary's Baby* and *Repulsion*, it centres on the fragile Silvia (Mimsy Farmer), who's plagued by visions of her dead mother and visitations by a little girl – apparently her younger self. Chat about black magic and a visit to a psychic leave us uncertain whether a trauma is bubbling up of its own accord, or Silvia's being gaslit for some sinister purpose.

Answers are finally delivered in shockingly visceral fashion. En route this is a strikingly colourful affair, a compendium of modish '70s interiors (fans of garish floral wallpaper will be in heaven) set to a gorgeous Morricone-esque score.

Extras This Indicator release supplies a triple-whammy of director Francesco Barilli, interviewed in 2008, 2016 and 2025 (24/16/20 minutes). He goes over the same ground, in increasingly world-weary style!

Writer Stephen Thrower provides an astute overview (34 minutes). The "young Silvia" actor (11 minutes) only recalls "flashes". Also new: a talking head on composer Nicola Piovani (33 minutes), and a critical commentary. Plus: English/Italian-language versions; then/now locations footage (six minutes); gallery; trailers; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

COLUMBIA/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Brains aren't the only body part zombies are keen on.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

Zombie Refresh Eaters

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1990 | 18 | 4K

Director **Tom Savini**

Cast **Tony Todd, Patricia Tallman, Tom Towles, McKee Anderson**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Remaking a horror** classic is a risky business, but this colour redo of George Romero's seminal zombie film – scripted/overseen by Romero, but helmed by make-up whizz Tom Savini – successfully walks a path between fidelity and freshening things up.

It boasts elements Romero's handmade labour of love couldn't: complex zombie make-ups; bigger pyrotechnics; sprinkled f-bombs. But the smartest innovation is giving Patricia Tallman's Barbara a Sigourney Weaver-esque character arc, from whimpering wreck to bandolier-wearing badass.

Savini cleverly plays with expectations, there are some neat touches (like a junkie zombie with dangling syringe), and the human conflict still compels, as besieged strangers butt heads over tactics. A valiant attempt to do more than just secure a payday for producers who made barely a dime in '68.

Extras This dual-format Sony release's USP is an uncensored cut that restores trims made to secure an R rating – like a zombie head exploding. A new commentary by Savini helpfully flags the 12 extra seconds. The theatrical cut (with old Savini track) is also included.

Two 2016 interviews are essential viewing. Savini (28 minutes) frankly explains why making the film was an unhappy experience, with no time to shoot many of his 600 storyboards. And two make-up guys (21 minutes) detail the lengths they went to for realism (like visiting a morgue).

Seven more featurettes (123 minutes – six new) quiz the editor, two producers, four of the leads, and two zombie performers; these prove mostly unremarkable. Plus: a 1999 Making Of (25 minutes); trailer. **Ian Berriman**

i Producer Russell Streiner cameos as a Sheriff. Until the day of the shoot, George Romero was set to play the role.

4K X FOUR

OLD MOVIES NOW AVAILABLE ON UHD

Tom Holland's 1985 horror-comedy **FRIGHT NIGHT** (out now) sees a teen turn to Roddy McDowall's late-night TV horror host to combat his vampiric neighbour. We said: "It's still got plenty of bite... the gooey special effects hold up surprisingly well." The US got a 4K in 2022; expect Sony's UK Steelbook to carry over its new additions, including a cast reunion script read. In Dan O'Bannon's **RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD** (13 October), a chemical leak causes partying punks to be caught up in an outbreak of fast-moving and (for the first time) brains-hungry zombies. We said: "Studded with moments of delicious jet-black comedy... a flavoursome blend of sweet and sour." This Arrow Video Limited Edition replicates the (copious) bonuses from Second Sight's 2013 Blu-ray. But hey, you do get a poster! Warm up for *Tron: Ares* by watching Jeff Bridges's programmer get transported into the videogame he's designing in the original 1982 **TRON** (out now). We said: "The years have not been kind... Now we've seen CGI create the giant blue catpeople of Pandora, the fact that the story is threadbare is left all too exposed." No new bonuses here. A 4K of 2010's *Tron: Legacy* is also available. Finally, David Lynch's polarising prequel **TWIN PEAKS: FIRE WALK WITH ME** (13 October) follows the last week of Laura Palmer's life. We said: "A classic film and a failure all in one; rich, sick, staccato and strange." This Criterion Collection release carries over extras from their 2021 Blu-ray.

THE CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN

Let us Bray

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 13 OCTOBER

1957 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Terence Fisher**

Cast **Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee, Hazel Court, Robert Urquhart**

"Where does it all begin?" ponders Peter Cushing's Baron Frankenstein, in reflective mood as he faces the guillotine. For the Hammer of legend, it begins here.

Terence Fisher's gothic confection wrests Mary Shelley's creation from the shadow of Boris Karloff. Christopher Lee's creature is all tormented eyes and awkward limbs; Cushing brings crucial sincerity and piercing, amoral intelligence, like a scalpel in human form. What a thrill to see these two horror legends begin their eternal battle.

Extras Madeline Smith visits Cushing's Whitstable for a look at the man behind the icon (50 minutes), and make-up artist Dave Elsey recreates Lee's fizzog (35 minutes), while two featurettes spotlight wardrobe supremo Mollie Arbuthnot (10 minutes) and Hammer's dressing-up box in general (16 minutes). Elsewhere, Mark Gatiss and Stephen Gallagher pay tribute to screenwriter Jimmy Sangster (39 minutes), Stephen Volk gives an insight into the gothic tradition (24 minutes), and there's a celebration of DOP Jack Asher (12 minutes). Sangster also features in a 1997 stage Q&A (24 minutes).

Being formerly deceased is no excuse for that haircut.

Unsold '50s TV pilot *The Tales Of Frankenstein* proves a pretty unremarkable curio (27 minutes); the story behind it (28 minutes) is more interesting. The BBC's epic 1994 Hammer doc *Flesh And Blood* (148 minutes) is accompanied by outtakes from Cushing and Lee's narration and some infectiously joyous behind-the-scenes footage of the two gents reuniting, only months before Cushing's passing.

There's also a piece on the making of this 4K restoration (eight minutes) and various archival features, plus a trailer and gallery.

The dual-format Collector's Edition comes with a 168-page booklet, a poster, eight lobby cards and a reprint of the '70s comic adaptation. **Nick Setchfield**

i Hammer could only refer to Frankenstein's creation as the Creature, as Universal owned the rights to the Monster.

SPAWN

Long live the necroflesh

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1997 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Mark AZ Dippé**

Cast **Michael Jai White, John Leguizamo, Martin Sheen, Theresa Randle**

Unleashed in print in 1992, *Spawn* cemented writer/artist Todd McFarlane's rep as a comic book rock star. Some of its steroidal, demented energy survives into this flashy but incoherent movie version.

Michael Jai White is Al Simmons, a "borderline psychopath, perfect for government service" who goes from Steven Seagal-like badass to disfigured, cursed superhero. Saddled with the company of John Leguizamo – playing the Clown as an unholy splice of Jack Nicholson's Joker and Danny DeVito's Penguin – Simmons seeks revenge on a double-crossing Martin Sheen. White is impressively intense in the title role, even while submerged beneath superb prosthetics by future *The Walking Dead* zombie wrangler Greg Nicotero.

Some shonky digital Hellscapes summon hopeless nostalgia for the days of PS2, but CGI shots of Spawn's billowing cape successfully translate McFarlane's pulp opera aesthetic to the screen.

Extras Arrow Video's 4K restoration presents the Director's Cut alongside the theatrical release. A new commentary by Dave Baxter brings some deep-cut knowledge of the comics. New interviews include Michael Jai White, reflecting on "that damn hot-ass suit" (16 minutes); supporting players DB Sweeney and Melinda Clarke (17 minutes);

"Come on guys, who stole my ladder?"

animatronic and make-up artists Howard Berger and Nicotero (20 minutes); editor Michael Knue (16 minutes), and music supervisor Happy Walters, who shares how he assembled the soundtrack, complete with collabs between Korn and the Dust Brothers (10 minutes).

There's also a 1998 commentary teaming McFarlane with the director and two of his team, a 1998 interview with McFarlane (20 minutes), and a Making Of (22 minutes). Plus: galleries of storyboards, concept art and McFarlane sketches; trailer; an ad for the VHS of *Spawn: The Animated Movie*; booklet; double-sided poster.

Nick Setchfield

i An unmade sequel was set to focus on detectives Sam Burke and Twitch Williams, relegating Spawn to the sidelines.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *Bring Her Back* • *The Fantastic Four: First Steps* • *I Know What You Did Last Summer* • *Smurfs* *Strange Journey: The Story Of Rocky Horror* (20 October) • *Together* • *The Toxic Avenger* • *Weapons*

BABY BLOOD

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1990 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Alain Robak**

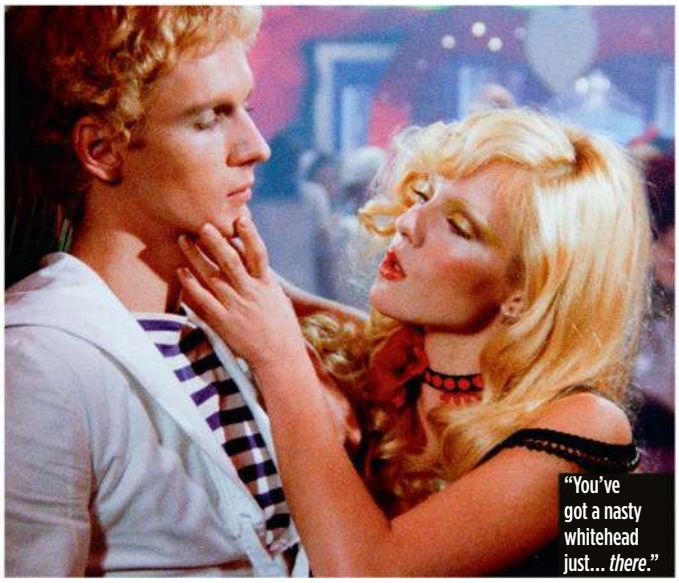
Cast **Emmanuelle Escourrou, Jean-François Gallotte**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **If someone** played you *Baby Blood* with the sound turned down (and subtitles turned off) you could be forgiven for not realising it's a French film. With its focus on the scuzzy underbelly of society, and its lashings of gore (and gratuitous nudity) – not to mention gliding *Evil Dead* POV shots – this low-budget effort has far more in common with the work of Frank Hennenlotter than the glossy Cinéma du look.

Emmanuelle Escourrou plays a circus employee rudely impregnated by an ancient parasite, which then psychically commands her to commit murders to supply it with blood. Yep, it's a *Prevenge* precursor.

The mere fact that this was France's first splatter film makes it an interesting curio. However, while *Baby Blood* has a certain scabrous brio, there isn't much to it beyond a string of blood-splattered set-pieces. **Extras** This Studiocanal Cult Classics title adds a 20-minute Kim Newman talking head to five 2018 interviews with cast and crew (65 minutes) from a German release. Recurring themes include the sense of freedom shared by the crew, and a tiger-cage sequence which left Escourrou terrified.

Two old commentaries are also ported over: one features Robak and Escourrou, the other two Aussie film critics. Sadly, we're denied the US dub, in which Gary Oldman voiced the parasite! Plus: trailer; four art cards. **Ian Berriman**



MALPERTUIS

SFX Loves

House Of Secrets

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 13 OCTOBER

1973 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Harry Kümel**

Cast **Orson Welles, Susan Hampshire, Michel Bouquet, Charles Janssens**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Harry Kümel's** follow-up to his cult vampire film *Daughters Of Darkness* is an exercise in sumptuous squalor.

Based on Belgian author Jean Ray's 1943 book, it follows sailor Jan (Mathieu Carrière) – a Jean Cocteau sketch come to life. He's abducted to the titular mansion, where his bedridden uncle (Orson Welles) is set to announce his will.

This madhouse holds a bizarre secret that's maintained almost to the end. While we wait, the labyrinthine confines of Malpertuis, with its leaf-strewn corridors, spiral staircases, stuffed bats and pickled foetuses are a joy to get lost in. Populating it are grotesques like a leering taxidermist, who provide a rich vein of perverse humour.

The film gets progressively bewildering, deploying fish-eye lens and framing devices that question if this is really reality. Few films are so effective at making you feel like you've been transported to another realm.

Extras Radiance's restoration of Kumel's Flemish director's cut has two new bonuses. An insightful Jonathan Rigby analysis (26 minutes) is useful on variations from the novel. A candid Kümel (20 minutes) slates his Warner-imposed editor as "incapable of understanding", and skewers Welles as "not a very nice person".

A fascinating featurette (26 minutes) – one of four from 2005 – expands on that, using out-takes of the controlling star. A first-rate Making Of (37 minutes) draws on Cannes interviews, costume designs and more, while a piece on Susan Hampshire's three main roles (12 minutes) offers make-up test footage. Key locations are also revisited (five minutes).

You also get the producer-assembled Cannes Cut; Kümel's 1965 short "The Warden Of The Tomb" (37 minutes), a dry take on a Kafka play; a 1965 Jean Ray interview (eight minutes); and a 1971 Belgian TV clip (14 minutes). Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Orson Welles insisted on payment in cash; a suitcase containing a million Belgian francs was delivered to his hotel room.

ROUND UP

Movies hitting shiny disc include Pixar's **ELIO** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now). Abducted by aliens, the titular orphan lad helps them deal with a warlord aggressor. We said: "Colourful and creative... a workable blend between sci-fi and caper comedy." Bonuses (51 minutes) include a Making Of, astronaut Q&A, "art class", Easter Eggs rundown, and deleted scenes. The live-action take on **HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now) takes a beat-for-beat approach to the story of Hiccup, the young Viking who befriends a dragon. We said: "When it comes to its central relationship, it's a lesson in how to drain a dragon of its personality." The extras include director's commentary, a 45-minute Making Of, six short featurettes, and two deleted scenes. In **M3GAN 2.0** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now), the killer android is rebuilt to take on a military robot bent on human extinction. We said: "A lot of fun. It's also a lot, period... crammed with twisty-turny plotting, exposition dumps and frequent musings on the pros and cons of AI." This "unrated edition" adds a little gore (like a severed head), and comes with four featurettes (31 minutes). Finally, Danny Boyle continues his not-really-zombies saga with **28 YEARS LATER** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now) as a boy from an island community heads to the mainland seeking a cure for his ailing mother. We said: "If you like rich world-building, you've hit the jackpot. If you want plausible characterisation, you're shit out of luck." Bonuses: five featurettes, totalling 31 minutes.

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JOE HILL
KING Sorrow
'A brilliantly-Faustian fable... with a heart as huge as a dragon's'
RUTH WARE
SFX Loves

KING SORROW

Playing with fire

★★★★★

RELEASED 21 OCTOBER
896 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Joe Hill**
Publisher **Headline**

In our forebears' worldview, in the comparatively near past, the veil between the worlds was permeable. Our ancestors, departed friends and the saints could visit us, but so too could the unquiet dead, fey folk up to no good, and monsters. Moreover, our own world was a far stranger place than we imagine today, less susceptible to rational explanation. Well, unless you're a conspiracy theorist.

But what if our reality mapped far more closely onto how our predecessors thought? What if our fear of the eldritch creatures that inhabit the dark was justified? What if the human imagination could manifest our deepest fears?

To judge by *King Sorrow*, such a world would be a terrifying place. Just ask Colin Wren, siblings Donna and Donovan McBride, Allison Shiner, Gwen Underfoot and Arthur Oakes, who call a fire-breathing dragon – the eponymous King Sorrow – into their lives.

They do this because budding academic Arthur, likened by his adoring friend and sometime lover Gwen to "a young Steve Biko, but with Tolkien's dress sense", is blackmailed into stealing rare books from his college library. As the six effectively conduct a kind of dreamlike seance in order to gain some supernatural assistance, King Sorrow passes through.

But dragons don't work for free. And dragons are tricksters too. Sorrow, deadpan quipping as he goes, will gladly help out, but his price is that every year, the six must select a new victim, otherwise one of them will be killed come Easter Day. The moral questions that lie at the centre of Hill's story flow from the dilemma this poses. Can you justify keeping yourself alive by selecting people who *deserve* to die in your place? Or perhaps by selecting people who are suffering? Can violence beget anything other than more violence? Can you somehow avoid culpability for crimes conducted in your name?

Big themes, but don't for a moment imagine that means *King Sorrow* is somehow hard going. Instead, this is slipstream horror, often genuinely creepy and, despite its length, aimed squarely at the mainstream market.

The structure helps to prevent the novel from becoming too daunting. Because it's effectively a series of linked novellas, with each focusing on different combinations of characters as we follow them across the years from 1989 towards the present day, you never have to wait too long for a partial plot resolution.

The characters are carefully chosen as a way to show a cross-section of American life, a society where Colin, the tech-bro moneyman, sits at the apex – which turns out to be something we should all be worried about. Several of their names are revealing. Arthur, in a book that plays with stories of Camelot, is chivalric. For all she's brittle, Allison is glamorous and bright. In comparison to her privileged friends, Gwen is a townie, her surname redolent of someone hanging around with the cool kids, although ironically she is the most able and admirable of them all.

Through the interweaving stories of the six and of those who come into their orbit – notably Tana, brutalised as a child, and transgender Robin, both in their

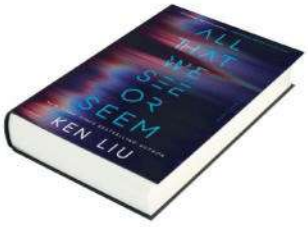
> **"This is slipstream horror, often genuinely creepy"**

different ways survivors – *King Sorrow* builds towards an explosive set-piece conclusion. Given sufficient budget, this will make a great miniseries.

But what lingers is the sense of Hill writing about intimacy, the mysterious currents of friendships that flow even as those we know longest let us down and how, when you love "someone enough... a part of them [is] copied into you forever". Equally haunting are the parallels Hill teases out between the digital worlds we have created, places that aren't real yet where events profoundly impact our day-to-day lives, and the mythologies our ancestors built. Magnificent – by far and away Hill's best book to date.

Jonathan Wright

i One of *King Sorrow*'s inspirations was the 1972 Philip experiment conducted in Toronto, a seance that was filmed.



ALL THAT WE SEE OR SEEM

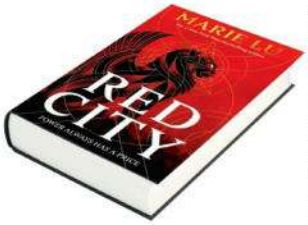
★★★★½

RELEASED 9 OCTOBER
416 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Ken Liu**
Publisher **Head Of Zeus**

Look past the professionally curated shared dream experiences at the heart of this sci-fi thriller, and *All That We See Or Seem* is undeniably a novel about now.

Ken Liu (Hugo Award-winning author of *The Dandelion Dynasty*, as well as the translator of Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem*) expertly taps into contemporary concerns about AI, social media and the sinister actors manipulating new tech for their own benefit. He also takes inspiration from his previous careers in software engineering and the law, as reclusive tech expert Julia Z (a sort of near-future Lisbeth Salander) agrees to help corporate lawyer Piers Neri find his missing wife. The AWOL Elli Krantz's status as a superstar oneirofex (dream weaver) has brought her into the orbit of some very bad men, and the mismatched duo need to find her before their worst nightmares come true.

Whether it's homemade drones, sophisticated AI assistants or 24/7 surveillance, Liu's ideas are built on solid real-world foundations. He also asks pertinent questions about our relationship with (and over-dependence on) technology, while giving Julia a very cool digital kit bag to play with. More importantly, this is a pacy detective story, with ingenious clues to solve, unexpected twists, and a genuine sense of peril. **Richard Edwards**



RED CITY

★★★½☆

RELEASED **16 OCTOBER**
432 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Marie Lu**
Publisher **Tor**

Urban romantasy gets a neo noir makeover here in a book which could easily be renamed *Magical Gangs Of LA*. Part *Scarface*, part *Twilight*, it's the tale of two poor young immigrants in an alternate universe LA (or "Angel City") who are inducted into rival crime gangs of matter-transforming "alchemists".

Sam, from China, can become almost invisible in a crowd, while Ari, from the slums of India, has natural charisma that draws people to him. These are abilities that can be weaponised in a war to control a drug known as Sand, so both Ari and Sam are trained by different gangs to become alchemist assassins. What neither gang realises is that Sam and Ari are in love.

The novel starts strongly, with author Marie Lu's prose painting a vivid picture of the struggles and hopes of the young immigrants, and the brutal training they endure. But as they age into field agents, the book hits a "revenge-killing-sex-revenge-killing-sex" rut for the mid section, before rallying for a melodramatic, action-packed finale (there's a hint of more to come).

Strong, multifaceted characters and moments of lurid intensity keep things interesting, while the sex scenes are unashamed, super-powered wish-fulfilment. Let's just say that alchemists have the touch... **Dave Golder**

HEARTHSPACE

Bad neighbours

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
384 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Stephen Baxter**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Without being sniffy about fantasy or its kid sibling, romantasy, there has been a relative dearth of hard SF novels recently. More specifically, the kind of books that Stephen Baxter often writes – set in space, featuring arcane ships, full of big ideas – seem to come around less often.

Still, while we wait for the next space opera boom, Baxter is still producing novels that are epic, yet always seem plausible. It probably helps that Baxter is a trained engineer whose connections with the British Interplanetary Society run deep. He does his research – as anyone who's ever read the reference-heavy afterwords to his books can testify.

This time, the setting is the Hearth, an area of space filled with so many planets that there are multiple Earth-like homes for humankind to colonise – plus gas giants and superheated worlds.

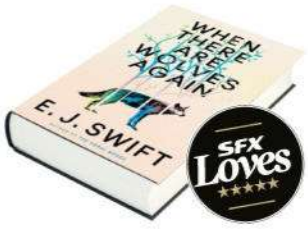
> **"Baxter is still producing novels that are epic yet plausible"**

The knowledge of how people got to the region has been lost in time. And, while framing passages reveal the colonists' backstory, the bulk of the book's action is set aboard a vast, light sail-powered ship that swoops in unexpectedly to the inner part of the Hearth, a region where living is comparatively easy because planets suitable for human habitation abound.

The newcomers are from a colder region. Their society is tough and violent, based on patronage. Worse, as Commander Ulla Breen of Patrol 45 finds out when she is taken prisoner, the newcomers are slavers.

What follows is a story of survival that, leaving aside the odd plot beat you may spot ahead of time, plays out brilliantly. The central relationships – between Ulla and Pulet, a slaver who's also a kind of scholar-cum-senior political apparatchik, and between Ulla and her superior, Commodore Mott – are deftly sketched. It can also be read as a comment on our present geopolitical situation, and why cooperation is better than force. **Jonathan Wright**

Hearthspace is set around a dark matter star, a theoretical kind powered by the implosion of (you guessed it) dark matter.



WHEN THERE ARE WOLVES AGAIN

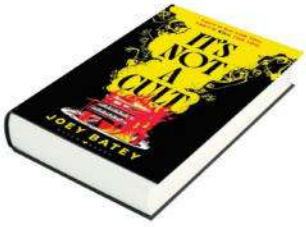
★★★★★

RELEASED **9 OCTOBER**
304 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **EJ Swift**
Publisher **Arcadia**

When thinking about human destruction of the natural world, your mind probably goes to the Amazon rainforest. But according to government advisory body Natural England, the UK is "one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world", with one in six species threatened with extinction. To many, conservation doesn't cut it; what we need is a more radical approach, popularly known as "rewilding".

In 2070, two women look back on their roles in rewilding: Lucy as an activist, Hester as a documentary-maker. Author EJ Swift extrapolates from current initiatives – beavers reintroduced in Argyll, marshlands recreated in Somerset – to imagine the dreams and dangers of reshaping Britain's relationship with the natural world.

It's an idealistic tale – there are shades of Kim Stanley Robinson to its conviction that small groups of people *can* bring about change – but a grounded one. Swift's exquisite writing brings life to everything from soil to sky, and also confronts the human cost of change, whether individual (Lucy's estrangement from her conservative parents), or collective (the decline of the farming communities Hester grew up in). It's a novel to make you touch grass, and dream of wolves. **Nic Clarke**



IT'S NOT A CULT

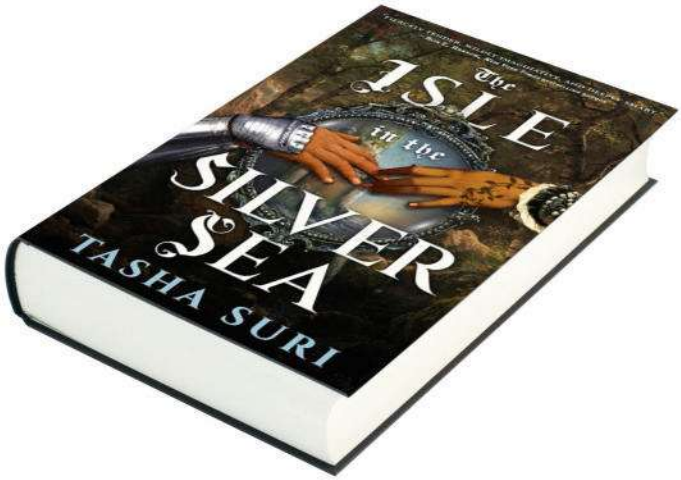
★★★★☆

RELEASED 23 OCTOBER
320 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Joey Batey**
Publisher **Raven Books**

Joey Batey is best known for playing the bard Jaskier in Netflix's *The Witcher*. In his debut novel a nameless – and hopeless – band in the North East find themselves the unwitting inspiration for a fandom that makes Swifties look like a picture of restraint.

The group is made up of songwriter Callum, attention-hungry singer Melusine, and introverted drummer Al. Callum has concocted a labyrinthine mythology to underpin their music: song cycles that revolve around a pantheon of gods dubbed "Solkats". When one of their gigs descends into violence, however, the band pick up a dangerous following who believe the Solkats are real. They might be right.

Batey likely knows a thing or two about obsessed devotees, but *It's Not A Cult* is less about music fandom and more about radicalisation. Fuelling the band's rise to infamy is vlogger K-Li, whose fixation comes at the cost of her mainstream career, but makes her a central hub for the similarly fixated – she'll be a familiar sort of figure to anyone who ever lost a friend or relative to the "plandemic" brainworms. The Solkats, meanwhile, are a creepily elusive force, tinting every gig with an ambiguously supernatural edge. Batey writes confidently, leaning into the mordant comedy, while also fully committing to the book's disturbing premise. **Will Salmon**



THE ISLE IN THE SILVER SEA

Queer as folk tales

★★★★☆

RELEASED 21 OCTOBER
496 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Tasha Suri**
Publisher **Orbit Books**

Human beings, the late Sir Terry Pratchett liked to point out, run on narrative. We are storytelling apes. The latest novel from Tasha Suri takes this idea and runs with it. It conjures a Britain where powerful stories recur and certain people, incarnates, are predestined to play out these tales.

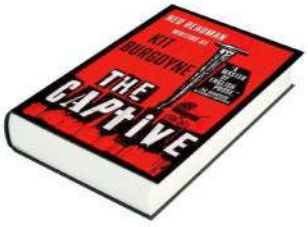
The story that animates Suri's book is "The Tale Of The Knight And The Witch", a tragedy in which the central couple are doomed to fall in love and die at the hands of the other. Incarnates are honoured, in great part because the future of the kingdom is bound up with them, in ways that are unclear at the beginning of the novel, but this is a tough gig.

The latest unfortunates possessed by the tale are Simran, a witch of the woods, and Vina, a knight in the court of the Eternal Queen, a monarch as monstrous as she is powerful and controlling. However, instead of simply waiting for their fates to befall them at a time when an assassin is stalking stories, the duo refuse to accept their fates meekly. Instead, the book functions in many respects as a classical fantasy quest narrative. Can they break the cycle?

It's a novel that takes huge delight in playing with fantasy conventions, beginning by framing its central plot as a sapphic love story. More deeply, it uses romantasy/fantasy to explore what it means to be British if you're an immigrant or descended from recent immigrants, or if you're mixed race, or from the LGBTQ+ community.

At a time when the far right is on the rise, this theme is, albeit tacitly, political, but Suri's prose never comes across as the work of someone working to write an allegorical novel. Instead, it reads as if she's had huge fun playing in the sandbox of these islands' mythology, including nods to Arthurian legend, and its fairy tales – taking back control of the idea that these narratives belong to us all. **Jonathan Wright**

i Tasha Suri will be taking part in events in London, Norwich and York from 22-30 October. See tashasuri.com/events.



THE CAPTIVE

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
336 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Kit Burgoyne**
Publisher **Titan Books**

The "debut" novel from Kit Burgoyne (actually Ned Beauman, the award-winning author of *Venomous Lumpsucker*, writing under his new horror-focused alter-ego) is a deadpan horror thriller that feels perfectly timed for our present moment.

Luke is a member of The Nail, a group of anti-capitalist guerrillas who intend to make a stand against the all-powerful Woolsaw Group, an evil corporation not a million miles away from several real-world multinationals. To do so, they concoct an elaborate plan to abduct young heiress Adeline Woolsaw.

Surprisingly, it more or less goes off without a hitch, until they discover that Adeline is pregnant – and about to go into labour. Complicating matters further: her newborn appears to have unearthly powers. Meanwhile, Adeline's ruthless family will stop at nothing to get the baby back.

As with Beauman's other books, there's a thick vein of satire and social commentary here, with the insidious ways large corporations slide unnoticed into all our lives a key theme. It's unsubtle stuff (effectively: what if capitalism was literally Satanic?), but this is first and foremost a thriller that squeezes its weightier themes in next to well-executed chase scenes, some gruesome deaths, and fire raining from the sky. Hellzapoppin' in a book that's a huge amount of apocalyptic fun. **Will Salmon**

ALCHEMY OF SECRETS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Stephanie Garber**
Publisher **Gollancz**

The question mark key on author Stephanie Garber's keyboard took a pummelling while she was writing this fast-paced, Hollywood-themed urban fantasy. The plot is so convoluted that the protagonist spends vast chunks of the novel asking herself, "Why?", "What?", "When?", "Where?", "Who?" and "How?". Even then she's only asking a fraction of the questions the reader will be.

That protagonist is Holland, the secret daughter of a famous puzzle-loving director who was murdered by his wife when Holland and her twin sister were young. She has grown up fascinated with urban myths, and enrols in a course run by a strange professor who alerts her students to the location of her lectures using cryptic clues. Then Holland encounters an actual urban myth, the Watch Man, who tells her she will die the next day unless she locates a magical artefact called The Alchemical Heart.

What follows is a madcap quest that zigzags across LA like *Tomb Raider* meets *Scooby-Doo*. None of the supporting characters are what they seem, all have secret agendas, and few are much more than storytelling cogs. It's diverting enough, but the plot holds together like a game of KerPlunk, ever teetering on the verge of collapse. Don't ponder too much and you should make it through. **Dave Golder**

RAINFOREST

★★★½☆

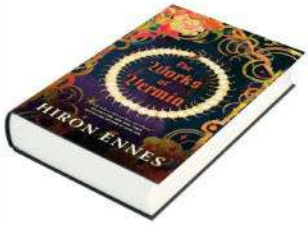
RELEASED 9 OCTOBER
240 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Michelle Paver**
Publisher **Orion**

After a bad break-up, a change of scenery can be rejuvenating, but entomologist Simon Corbett takes it to the extreme in this tropical ghost story. Joining a dig in Central America, he's hoping to shake off his heartbreak by discovering a new kind of mantid. The thing is, ghosts don't need plane tickets, and this one isn't letting Simon go...

The story initially unfolds through Simon's journal entries, which means we get to see his unpleasant personality up close. He's cold, judgemental, and violently racist – the book is set in the early '70s, but Simon seems particularly bigoted.

He's also lying to himself (and us) about what happened between him and his beloved Penelope, with the truth slowly, creepily unfolding as the rainforest pushes Simon's sanity to the brink. It's cleverly done, and the rainforest-based discomforts are vividly rendered. Simon prides himself on his logic, but there are several moments where we see past his bluster and, unable to stop him, have to wait for the consequences of his mistakes.

The latter chapters, where Simon can't access his journal, don't work quite as well. A neat bit of foreshadowing means the reader can anticipate his gruesome fate, but given how grimy you'll feel from spending so many pages in this horrible man's head, what happens is pretty unsatisfying. **Sarah Dobbs**



THE WORKS OF VERMIN

★★★★½

RELEASED 16 OCTOBER
432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Hiron Ennes**
Publisher **Tor Nightfire**

Plenty of horror novels have been described as "skin-crawling", but none of them deserves the epithet as much as *The Works Of Vermin*.

Set in the grotesque city of Tiliard, which grows like a fungus from the remains of an ancient tree, this is a book infested with bugs. Dual narratives draw the reader into a world where people and insects alike shed their skins and emerge in different forms; where everything's rotting, but nothing's ever really dead.

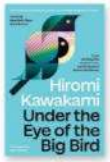
Guy Moulène is an exterminator, taking on all kinds of work to keep himself and his sister fed. In the court of the Grand Marshal, head perfumer Aster Voth lives in luxury, cooking up scent concoctions that lend their wearers beauty, eloquence or authority, but a lung infection stops her reaching her true potential. Both of their worlds will be upended by a giant centipede that lurks in the city's roots, munching on its foundations and dripping hallucinogenic slime.

The world-building feels unintuitive at first, but trust the process. Visceral prose conjures a too-vivid world of repulsive insectoid monsters and morally grimy politics, and the more time you spend in Tiliard, the more familiar it feels. Slowly but convincingly, Hirons Ennes creates a dense tapestry no grub could chew through. **Sarah Dobbs**

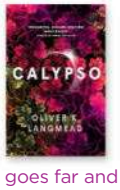
REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks is MR Carey's medieval fantasy-horror **ONCE WAS WILLEM**

(★★★★★, out now, Orbit). It transposes the *Seven Samurai* template to a 12th century village, as a boy resurrected as a shambling revenant by dark magic recruits six supernatural allies to oppose a malevolent wizard plotting to gain immortality by sacrificing children. We said: "Carey has a talent for crafting an inventive turn of phrase... The plot and pacing are similarly impressive... Magical, expansive, and inventive, it's a joy to read." Set in a distant future where humanity's going extinct and children are made in factories from the cells of rabbits and dolphins, Hiromi



Kawakami's Booker Prize-shortlisted **UNDER THE EYE OF THE BIG BIRD** (★★★★½, 9 October, Granta) unfolds over the course of aeons, offering a linked series of snapshots. We said: "A slow, meditative, and cumulative portrait of the end of the world as we know it... Kawakami finds lightness and charm amid the sadness." Finally, the crew of a colony ship fall out over ideological differences on arrival at their new world in Oliver K Langmead's **CALYPSO** (★★★★½, out now, Titan). Arguments and violence ensue. The unique selling point here: the story's told through the medium of



epic poetry, *Paradise Lost*-style. We said: "There's an emotional heft to the book that goes far and above most colonisation narratives... If you take a risk on just one SF book this year, make it this one."

BULLET TIME

A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS

ROCKY HORROR: A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT THE CULT CLASSIC

RELEASED OUT NOW!
256 pages | Hardback
Author **Mick Rock**
Publisher **Coronet**

- A glorious 50th anniversary chronicle of the movie's filming (and more), from the archives of cult photographer Mick Rock.
- From *Rocky* creator Richard O'Brien's foreword: "The meeting of Frank-N-Furter and Mick Rock was that of two people hungry for a symbiotic relationship or experience."
- There are images here that O'Brien himself says he's never seen before.
- Patricia Quinn sums up: "I truly believe that without Mick, there wouldn't be *Rocky Horror*... If it hadn't been captured, who would bloody know about it?"

FIRSTBORN OF THE SUN

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 23 OCTOBER
568 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Marvellous Michael Anson**
Publisher **Michael Joseph**

Marvellous Michael Anson adds to the growing canon of fantasy novels that draw upon Yoruba mythology with *Firstborn Of The Sun*. Her premise is a familiar one: a young woman, L'ore, is the only person in the kingdom of Oru born without agbára, the ability to harness the power of the sun. Inevitably, L'ore discovers that she possesses a secret and forbidden ice magic, the existence of which has been kept hidden by the high priest who rules Oru.

Anson throws in a handsome prince, Alawani, to whom L'ore has never confessed her love, and a mystery about the origin of L'ore's powers and the identity of her mother for good measure. The worldbuilding is patchy; there's plenty of attention given to the intricacies of the succession to the throne, but the rival religious factions and magics are painted in broad strokes, with vague talk of old and new gods.

Action scenes can be hard to follow, with key moments skipped over, and while the pacing is slow at the start, it picks up in the second half. Anson has a slightly breathless style, with everyone – L'ore most of all – feeling and expressing every emotion at fever pitch, yet the well-worn central conceit leaves *Firstborn Of The Sun* feeling overly formulaic. **David West**

OUR GIFTED HEARTS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 14 OCTOBER
400 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Jennifer Kennedy**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

A young wife, a rich husband, the restless souls of murdered women who've gone before... it's a well-known tale, that of Bluebeard and his eventual thwarting by his cleverer-than-expected final bride. This debut novel puts a different spin on it, though, with a new wife, who married to flee accusations of witchcraft, and isn't as helpless as her husband believes.

Fortune Blyth was only a teenager when her first baby, carried in secret, died at birth. She swears to the Devil that she will never let any man touch her again, only to break that vow when marriage is the only escape from her superstitious neighbours.

Isaiah Quickly seems a saviour – a kind, gentle man who warns her that his home is remote and desolate, though made comfortable with wealth. He is away often, and Fortune finds herself left with his housekeeper, mother, and groundsman, all with their own secrets and stories – but it is the mysterious women she is haunted by who make her realise she may have been safer in her village.

Fortune is well-drawn and you ache for the injustices done to a young woman both by men and the society she is born into. Other characters fall more quickly into stock roles, from the miserable servant to the outdoors man with a tragic past, but they still play their parts in a fresh take on a classic story. **Rhian Drinkwater**

ALSO OUT

As ever, there's a teetering pile of other titles we couldn't fit in. Comprising 29 bite-size morsels (all illustrated), Steve Cole and Paul Magrs's **DOCTOR WHO: 1001 NIGHTS IN TIME AND SPACE** (out now, BBC Books) looks at elements of the series (be it Condo from "The Brain Of Morbius", or the Abzorbaloff) through a fairy tale lens. *Doctor Who* historian/toy collector David Howe documents his love affair with the series in memoir **WHO ME!** (9 October, Bedford Square). And Rob Shearman has novelised two of his Big Finish audio dramas: Edwardian murder mystery **THE CHIMES OF MIDNIGHT** (9 October, BBC Books) and **JUBILEE** – an inspiration for the classic 2005 episode "Dalek". A police procedural involving a time-travelling conspiracy, Nicholas Binge's slim thriller **EXTREMITY** (out now, Tor) kicks off when two bodies are found – both the *same* body of a billionaire. The work of "SG Hartnell" (a pseudonym for BP Walter), **MEDLOCK** (out now, Sphere) is a gothic riff on Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic *The Secret Garden*, centred on the housekeeper of a manor house in 1978. A mash-up of body horror and folk horror, Gemma Amor's **ITCH!** (9 October, Hodder & Stoughton) centres on a village about to celebrate an annual festival, and a woman who finds an ant-infested body in the woods. Finally, *Alien* fans are surely the target market for SA Barnes's **COLD ETERNITY** (9 October, Bantam), a slice of creepy space horror set on a drifting cryo-sleep crypt called Elysian Fields.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Andrew Michael Hurley

The folk horror novelist still finds this writing business "excruciating"...

What is your daily writing routine like?

To some extent it depends on where I'm up to with a particular project, but I've found that I just have to put the hours in to make progress. So I'll generally start at around seven in the morning, work until lunchtime, and then by about three in the afternoon I'm done in and have to stop.

Describe the room in which you typically write.

It's nothing more glamorous than the back half of the garage, but it has a window that looks over the garden and it's a quiet, private space in which I can think and write.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

I'm proud of them all, to be honest. They all came with significant challenges that I had to overcome. If pushed, I'd maybe go for *Starve Acre*. It's possibly the most disturbing and compact of the novels I've written. I like stories you can read in one sitting.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

There was a great deal of added pressure with my second book, *Devil's Day*, as *The Loney* had gained a lot of attention. That said, my latest novel, *Saltwash*, eluded me for a long time too. There were so many ideas circulating that it took me a while to find the centre.

> **"By about three in the afternoon I'm done in and have to stop"**

Were you a keen reader as a child? Which books were your favourites?

I loved anything by Tolkien, of course, but also the Earthsea trilogy by Ursula K Le Guin, and Susan Cooper's The Dark Is Rising series. I seem to remember *The Hounds Of The Morrigan* by Pat O'Shea being a favourite too. But by the time I got to secondary school I was working my way through Stephen King and James Herbert and trying to write stories of my own – the gorier the better.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

I'd have to say Jim Crace. Every sentence he writes is so surprising and beautifully crafted. Every book is different from the others.

Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

I don't know if it's odd as such, but I came across *Devil's Day* in Barnes & Noble on Fifth Avenue. It was surreal to think that a story I'd written in my little room about a remote corner of Lancashire was on sale 3,000 miles away.

What's the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

I've found that students often assume that professional authors no longer struggle with writing. I have to break it to them that I still find it excruciatingly difficult, but I think they find that encouraging.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?

One thing we have to accept as writers is that we're going to have frustrating days as well as productive days. There's a great piece of advice from the novelist Isak Dinesen: "Write a little every day, without hope, without despair." I tell myself that as often as I can.

The inspirational Jim Crace.

Saltwash is out on 23 October, published by John Murray. The paperback edition of Barrowbeck has also just been released.

TONY FRENCH/ALAMY

First Read
AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

All That We See or Seem

by Ken Liu

If dreams can be shared, secrets can be stolen...

***All That We See or Seem* is a near-future thriller set in a world where the dark algorithms of AI have permeated every aspect of life.**

Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?
– EDGAR ALLAN POE

What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,
Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,
Scattering it freely forever.
– WALT WHITMAN

The camera spins around to reveal Mall-Jill, a woman in her forties: bright red lipstick, thick-rimmed glamour glasses, eyes that gleam from a bit of post-processing sparkle.
MALL-JILL: (whispering excitedly) I talked to Elli, and she agreed to let me film the dream session!
The camera spins back to Elli, who holds up both hands. The crowd quiets. She waits a beat.
ELLI: They say that the past is gone forever, that you can't go back. But every living thing leaves a ripple in Heraclitus's river, an expanding wave front that fades but never disappears. Just by living, you've already changed the universe forever.

Come with me to the anthracite mines of Carbon County...
Elli's fingers dance across the console on the podium. Images swirl across the giant screen behind her: ferns, cycads, ginkgos, dinosaurs. The crowd is rapt, eyes glazing over. Even distanced by the camera, one can feel that something extraordinary is happening. The crowd's breathing synchronizes, the murmuring voices merging into one. It's as though there's a single lung breathing, a bellows between earth and heaven, its unceasing movement the very beat of the cosmos.

The camera tilts to an odd angle and stops moving, seemingly propped against something. Jurassic images continue to play across the screen. Elli's voice fades, replaced by Mall-Jill's narration off-screen.
MALL-JILL: I've been to plenty of performances, some of them with big stars. But I can't remember any that moved me as much as Elli's did. The story she told is ridiculous, preposterous, absurd, on the level of the flat-earth theory or the moon-landing hoax.

Yet, I was utterly entranced.

I was on the border between wakefulness and sleep, that strange country ruled by dreams, when I decided to take the plunge. Don't just look, I told myself. *Be*. I stopped looking through the camera and started to look at *her*. I allowed the images she played on the screen to overwhelm me, gave myself permission to be *immersed* in the experience.

A man next to me whispered to the woman next to him something about a visit to the Conn College museum "when I was five." A few seconds later, I heard him gasp as images of a dinosaur mounted in a museum display loomed across the screen, immense, monumental, all-powerful, just the way a dinosaur would have appeared to a child. Someone else in the row behind me said, "We have to ally ourselves with all the other animals." And a few seconds later, the screen showed suntanned men and women bravely riding a pod of humpback whales off the coast of Cape Cod to head off an assault of government goons mounted on armored mosasaurs.

The last time I felt like this was when I played in my college band – that euphoria of making something together, of being something greater than our individual selves. Elli wove our memories, hopes, fancies into one collective dream. I seemed to hear the heartbeat of all those around me, a thumping chorus. I felt acutely the sense of being *connected*, that we were breathing and rebreathing the same air, that all our eardrums vibrated in sympathy with all our vocal cords.
The screen goes dark; lights come up. The vivid dream gathering is near its end. The camera is picked up again and pans around to show people leaving the theater, looking dazed. Mall-Jill interviews some of them.
SHAVED HEAD: I believe it. No question. Everything just fits.

The Author

Ken Liu is the author of the epic fantasy series The Dandelion Dynasty, as well as the short story collections *The Paper Menagerie And Other Stories* and *The Hidden Girl And Other Stories*. He has won the Hugo, Nebula and World Fantasy Awards – as well as other top genre awards around the world – for his fiction. A programmer and lawyer, he speaks and consults on futurism, technology history, and sustainable storytelling.

Wish I had a gas car so I could burn some of that dino-stuff.

FLORAL BLOUSE WITH BUTTERFLY NECKLACE: This was my first time at an Elli gathering. I'll definitely see her again. I'm going to move to Australia as soon as I save up the money! That's my message.

STANFORD SWEATSHIRT: I don't know about belief. What does it mean to believe something anyway? But I'll tell you what I know. I think loneliness is the quintessential condition of modernity. I eat alone; I sleep alone; I don't know the names of my neighbors; my coworkers don't exist for me outside the office. I talk to my mom once a week, and even that feels like a chore. I'm so lonely that sometimes I scream in my room just to be sure the world still exists.

It's not any better online. Everyone knows the internet is dead; it's only bots talking to bots now. Bots and scammers and trolls who want you to send them nudes – and when you say no, they call you a c*nt.

But when I was in there dreaming... I wasn't alone. I was part of something bigger. A movement. A story. Elli made me feel human.

"BE KIND TO ROBOTS" T-SHIRT: The sad thing is, I don't think Elli will ever be the biggest star. While everyone else is dreaming, Elli is awake. They, the government, the billionaires, they don't want people to wake up.

MALL-JILL: Like in the Matrix.

BE KIND TO ROBOTS: What?

More drone footage. We are looking at the parking lot from above. As cars stream out, the place feels more desolate than ever. The mall, a concrete island in the middle of a vast asphalt sea, feels strangely vulnerable. This physical manifestation of our collective desire, this temple to consumerism, has lost its faith.

MALL-JILL: Even after talking to dozens of Elli's fans, I still don't have a good sense of whether they really believe that the government is secretly trying to bring back dinosaurs to control the populace.

Dino corporection is like a lot of other conspiracy theories. I think people don't so much believe in them as they are trying to say something that they don't have the words for by *claiming* to believe them.

Decades have passed since our culture has become steeped in irony, trolling, the shorthand pidgin of memes that mean nothing and everything. Young people are on guard, terrified of sincerity – if you dare to show that you believe in something, you'll be called a sucker, a fool, a dinosaur trapped in the tar pit of sentimentality.

In order to show that they really believe in nothing, people preemptively claim to believe in the most impossible thing. It's Alice in Wonderland: a defense mechanism, an ironic Bat-Signal.

But maybe I'm overthinking this.

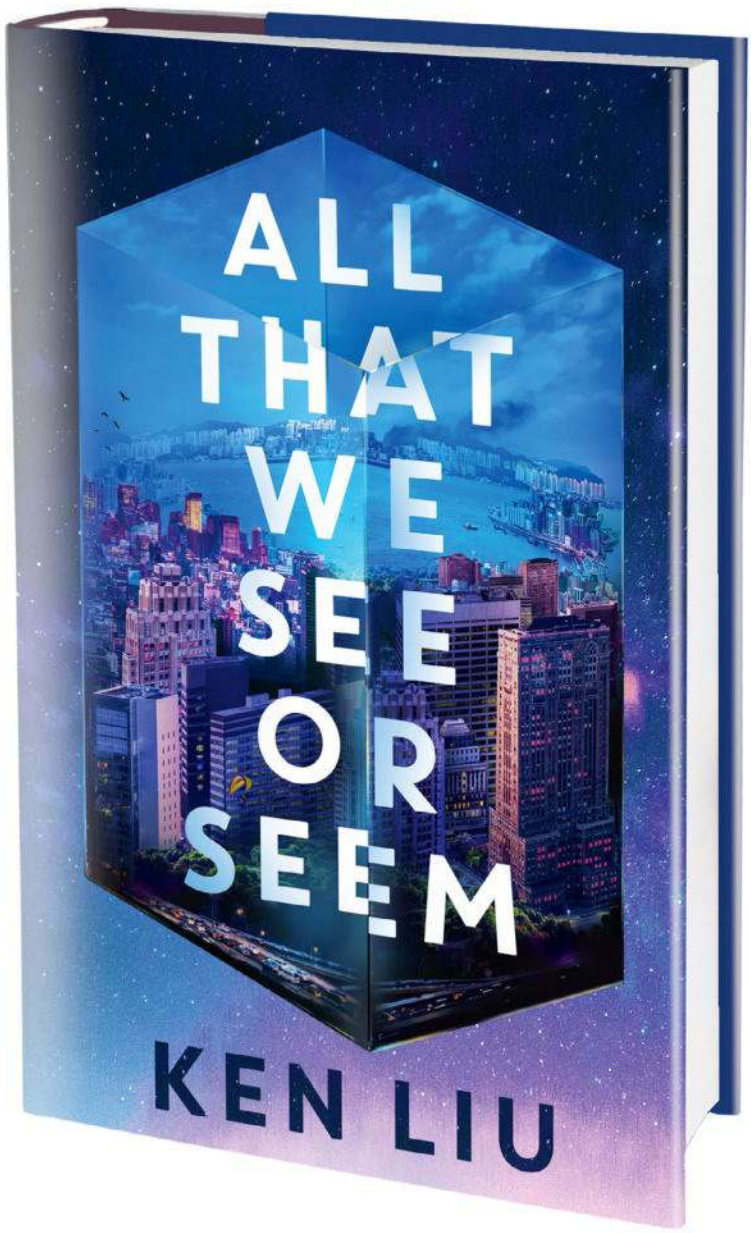
Maybe we should just take the conspiracy theorists at their word. Elli Krantz is like any other charismatic huckster, and her followers sheep penned in by a false narrative. Every doubt engendered by their nonsensical claims is immediately twisted into proof that the claims are actually true. The more they feel trapped by their nightmare, the louder they shout that the rest of the world is asleep. Nothing can be more American.

Or maybe Elli is like that other also very American figure, the trickster hero. In this version, Elli and her followers are in on the joke, and their collective performance is their art. Since their elders have made a mess of the world with political polarization, with ubiquitous propaganda, with tangled skeins of AI-enhanced post-truth narrative threads, they rebel by pretending to believe in the most outrageous of theories, to send up the ridiculousness of all ideologies.

Or maybe the answer is something even deeper. We live in an age of the isolated atomistic self, of the death of institutions. We don't go to churches; we don't even go to offices. It's hard for people to make friends, to date, to be with someone, since everything is mediated through screens, bots, AI – anonymous, efficient, inhuman. The deepest social bonds for many are parasocial – FlipClip stars, vocaloid idols, oneirofexes. Maybe this is why vivid dream gatherings are so popular. For the duration of the dream, you're not alone but part of a grander whole, something so much *more* than mere you. Dreaming together is how we feel we belong, how we give meaning to all that we see or seem.

Sorry to get all Joan Didion there on you at the end. Thank you for watching my channel, and make sure to like and subscribe.

Next time, I'll visit a dead mall that was once the very definition of glamour: the Forum Shops at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. You wouldn't believe how it has been reborn.



Read more in All That We See or Seem, from the award-winning author of the Dandelion Dynasty series, Ken Liu, out on 9 September.

CAPTAIN AMERICA

A Tale Of Two Captains

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Marvel Comics**

Writer **Chip Zdarsky**

Artist **Valerio Schiti**

ISSUES 1-3 **Fresh off a long run** on *Batman*, writer Chip Zdarsky has jumped publishers from DC to Marvel. This recently relaunched series takes us back to almost the beginning of Steve Rogers's story, and is set just a few weeks after he was defrosted in the "present day" – here, thanks to Marvel's sliding timescale, some time in the 21st century, although several years behind most of the current comics from the publisher.

It's a nostalgic set up, with the opening issue hitting plenty of familiar beats as Steve gets to grips with the confusing nature of the modern world, but there's also a bit of a bait and switch going on here. Intercut with Steve's storyline is the tale of another soldier, who is revealed at the end of the first issue to be Dave Colton, a brand-new Captain America.

Colton is a very different sort of Cap, one who came up fighting not Nazis, but in the far murkier War on Terror. He's had all of his moral certainties eroded by years of conflict and a loss of faith in America's shifting place on the world's stage. There's an immediate clash of personalities between these two different Caps, and that's before they reach Latveria to face the rising threat of Doctor Doom.

This isn't the first time a Captain America comic has engaged with the legacy of 9/11, of course. The Marvel titles of the 2000s were full of stories that tried, with varying degrees of success, to respond to a dramatically changed world. There's also really nothing new about forcing Cap to question whether he still believes in the nation he represents, with even the MCU movies having gone there at this point.

On the basis of these gripping first three issues, however, Zdarsky, artist Valerio Schiti and colourist Frank Martin have found a way to make things feel fresh and exciting again. This latest relaunch challenges Cap without deconstructing him. It believes, as all good Captain America stories should, that decency and kindness are necessary even in the darkest of times.

> **"Decency and kindness are necessary even in the darkest of times"**

The first arc, "Our Secret Wars", alternates between Steve grappling with his new reality and the terrible events that have worn away at Colton's soul. The two butt heads, but aren't quite enemies – though that may still come.

Schiti and Martin do a spectacular job in conveying the different perspectives and timelines at work here. There's a real elegance and kinetic energy to the former's linework, as well as a brutal efficiency in the fight scenes. It's a really handsome-looking comic book and one that, with its tale of two contrasting Captains, delivers an exciting, emotional hit. **Will Salmon**

i While the first arc is set in Cap's past, future stories will be told in the "present" of the Marvel Comics universe.

BENJAMIN

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Oni Press**

Writer **Ben H Winters**

Artist **Leomacs**

ISSUES 1-3 **Like a more** phantasmagorical *Memento*, this archly meta three-parter centres around obscure '70s science-fiction writer Benjamin J Carp, who inexplicably wakes up in an LA hotel room decades after his apparent death. While there are obvious comparisons with Philip K Dick, Winters – author of *The Last Policeman* – has also put a lot of himself into Benjamin.

Irascible and prone to verbose speeches that can overcrowd panels, Benjamin is initially quite arrogant and unlikeable, although there are some witty jokes about mobile phones resembling the *Star Trek*-style "psy-tac intercommulators" from his books. After developing a tender relationship with motel receptionist Marcus Dingle, the pair set out to discover the reasons behind his rebirth, delving into a box of Benjamin's old novels that Marcus was bequeathed by his father but hasn't actually read himself.

Grounding Winters's heady script with his solid figurework, Leomacs occasionally breaks loose from his usual standard grid layout with experimental page designs and psychedelic sequences. Despite talk of robots, eternal verities, *Matrix*-esque simulacra and global apocalypse, this is essentially a low-stakes drama where refreshingly the only action is an early street fight. And the understated, optimistic ending suggests that we can all leave the past behind. **Stephen Jewell**

NEWS FROM THE FALLOUT

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writer **Chris Condon**
Artist **Jeffrey Alan Love**

ISSUES 1-3 **America's early-'60s** era of nuclear paranoia has always been an evocative setting for sci-fi horror, and this six-issue miniseries wants to tap straight into the mood of that time with a grainy, B-movie-esque nightmare.

The action begins in 1962, when a nuclear bomb test at a Nevada military base goes horribly wrong, and the fallout from the detonation starts transforming everyone it touches. Soon the only survivor is taking shelter at a local diner as monstrous adversaries close in. However, writer Chris Condon hasn't brought a fresh enough approach to what's largely playing as an ultra-traditional tale of desperate survival in a zombie apocalypse.

These first three issues feature some nicely played character moments and a selection of grisly set-pieces, but the most attention-grabbing element so far is the art from Jeffrey Alan Love. Rendering much of the action as heavily stylised silhouettes against doomy grey backgrounds, Love's work gives the comic a unique atmosphere.

But this visual style also has its problems, with the reliance on silhouettes impacting the storytelling and making some dialogue difficult to follow. Combined with the thin story, this leaves *News From The Fallout* feeling like a selection of interesting elements that just aren't cohering. **Saxon Bullock**

DEADPOOL/BATMAN

Caped Crusader vs Mouthy Merc

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writers/artists **Various**

ONE-SHOT **It's been over 20 years** since the last Marvel/DC crossover, and the two companies have finally linked up again to deliver the most unashamedly commercial superhero team-up you could possibly imagine.

The first of two self-contained specials, this initial outing is largely written and drawn by Marvel talent (with a second *Batman/Deadpool* special, featuring DC writers and artists, arriving in November).

The biggest chunk of this jumbo-sized issue sees Batman having to deal with the anarchic arrival of Wade Wilson in Gotham City. Naturally, there's a predictable amount of chaos (and a brief Deadpool/Joker team-up), but while the story from Zeb Wells evolves almost exactly as you'd expect, enough of the gags land to make this a fun read, while Greg Capullo does a great job on the slick, energetic visuals.

> **"Enough of the gags land to make this a fun read"**

The biggest highlights actually arrive in the back-up stories, which act as a mini-anthology of additional Marvel/DC crossovers. Best of the lot is Chip Zdarsky and Terry Dodson's take on an alternate history where Captain America and Wonder Woman battle together in the Second World War and beyond. Elsewhere, there's also an adorable encounter between Krypto and Jeff the Land Shark, and a hilarious crossover between Green Lantern and Rocket Raccoon.

Less effective are a Kevin Smith-written tale that pitches Daredevil with Green Arrow, and a brief Batman/Wolverine fight written and drawn by Frank Miller. However, it's still a good hit-rate overall, making this an entertaining package. **Saxon Bullock**

i A *Deadpool* animated show overseen by Donald Glover almost happened in 2017, but fell apart due to "creative differences".

SPECTATORS

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writer **Brian K Vaughan**
Artist **Niko Henrichon**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **On top of being** one of the best known modern comics writers, Brian K Vaughan is also someone who likes to use comics to push boundaries. He's been regularly exploring adult themes and explicit content in his long-running, massively successful series *Saga*, and his latest self-contained graphic novel sees him going even further than that.

An offbeat blend of supernatural romance and bleakly satirical science fiction, *Spectators* follows two ghosts – Val, a voyeuristic woman who was killed in a mass shooting, and Sam, a gunslinger from the Old West – who haunt a strange, technology-obsessed future New York.

Only able to spectate on the living, they gradually realise that the world events they're currently witnessing may be genuine end-of-civilisation territory, with the story tracking their relationship across one night as the potential apocalypse marches closer.

Full-on and confrontational in its exploration of voyeurism, *Spectators* is emphatically *not* for the easily shocked. The frequent, incredibly explicit sequences of both sex and violence are realised in jaw-dropping detail thanks to the expertly crafted art from Niko Henrichon.

Sometimes brilliant and sometimes ungainly, this is a rambling, provocative and fascinatingly weird narrative experiment. **Saxon Bullock**

BORDERLANDS 4

Shooting spree

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PC**

Also available on **Xbox Series X|S, PS5, Switch 2**

Publisher **GSC Game World**

VIDEOGAME ***Borderlands 4* is** unashamedly no-frills. Gearbox's sci-fi shooter is about – wait for it – shooting, making no attempt to disguise the engine of its violence with prestige drama or moral complexities.

On the prison planet of Kairos, the hardest question you'll be asked is: "Would you prefer an acid-spitting sniper rifle, or an electrified submachine gun that turns into a grenade when its bullets run out?" Though your ultimate goal is to overthrow the Timekeeper, a dictator who controls his subjects using bolts welded to the spine, there is rarely time to think of the big picture.

The game is really about surviving whatever shootout you're in, using an arsenal of ludicrously exaggerated guns to blast synths and would-be bandits, then pluck more guns from the viscera. This formula works excellently in battle. *Borderlands 4* introduces new movement options – grappling, gliding, and dashing – to encourage slick, constant movement.

In fact, no other shooter this year has come close to *Borderlands 4*'s frenetic combat. It's accentuated by each of the game's four classes having brilliantly fun unique powers, which range from summoning scythe-wielding reapers to warping gravity. But this emphasis on action comes with a downside: the Timekeeper is so distant a villain that he fails to project any menace or gravitas during the game's 25-30 hour main quest, which in itself follows a fairly rote structure of helping one group of rebels after the other.

Likewise, *Borderlands*' trademark zany humour can at times work to its detriment. There are countless high-stakes boss fights where the tension is deflated by overly-quippy main characters; not for nothing is there a menu setting which allows you to silence the series' notoriously grating mascot Claptrap.

All *Borderlands 4* asks is that you meet it on the same wavelength: turn Kairos' gorgeous open world into a shooting gallery, don't think too hard, and you'll have fun. This is a flex from Gearbox, a reminder that the studio helped shape the looter-shooter genre. Come for the explosions, stay for the missile-launching assault rifle you pluck from the blast zone. **Andrew Brown**

i *Borderlands 4* includes a whopping 30 billion gun combinations, which tells you everything about the game's priorities.

"Kairos? Wasn't that in a lousy *Blake's 7* episode?"

DOCTOR WHO: ALIXION

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Running time **140 minutes**

Format **CD/download**

Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **"Alixion" is** perhaps the most mysterious of the "lost" stories that would have made up *Doctor Who*'s never-made 27th season. Aside from the name of the writer – Robin Mukherjee – and a few fragmentary details about the setting, little has been known about this adventure for almost 40 years – until now.

The Doctor and Ace have narrowly escaped a taxing adventure and are in need of some rest and recuperation. They check into a luxury health spa, but the Doctor grows suspicious of the elixir that everybody seems to drink. There's a scuttling behind the walls, and as the duo investigate they find themselves at the mercy of an entity who is able to weaponise their worst memories against them.

Often light and funny, it initially feels closer in tone to the absurdity of the earlier McCoy years than the mordant season 26. Still, the era's preoccupation with poking at Ace's troubled backstory is present and correct, as is its sense of the Doctor as a hero with secrets – though the Time Lord we meet here is more a guilt-wracked wanderer than the manipulative player of games the TV stories hinted at.

There are moments where the story veers to incoherence, but it's anchored by reliably charming performances from Sylvester McCoy and Sophie Aldred. **Rob Lockwood**

THUNDERBIRDS AND SPACE: 1999 – A CELEBRATION OF SCI-FI TOYS AND COLLECTIBLES

★★★★★

- Running until: **28 February 2026**
- Venue: **Museum of Brands, London**

EXHIBITION **A treasure trove of** memorabilia awaits both casual fans and Gerry Anderson obsessives in this eye-popping retrospective, assembled to mark the 60th and 50th anniversaries of *Thunderbirds* and *Space: 1999* respectively.

An opening vestibule acknowledges the latter alongside its live-action predecessor *UFO*, with a diorama of Moonbase Alpha and multiple iterations of the Eagle spacecraft taking centre stage. This is merely an appetiser for the larger gallery beyond, devoted to Anderson's Supermarionation adventures – sure to leave visitors mutely slack-jawed in wonder.

Larger items, like a vintage kiddie ride inspired by Gerry's early show *Supercar*, command the attention initially. But it's the dozen display cases surrounding it which reveal the range of the exhibition's riches, from Dinky diecasts of Thunderbird 2 in heretical cerulean blue to a Captain Scarlet cap generously donated by Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes (!). Elsewhere Joe 90's glasses, a Stingray skateboard and a maquette of Fireball XL5's Zoonie the Lazoon can be found. But with more than 500 objects to pore over, these are just the tip of a Tracy Island-sized iceberg. **Neil Smith**

HELL IS US

Whose bright Hadea was this?

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **PC, Xbox Series X|S**
- Publisher **Nacon**

VIDEOGAME **Smuggled out of the** war-ravaged country of Hadea as a small child, Remi was explicitly told never to return by his mother. Yet that's exactly what he does as an adult, determined to find his parents, with little more than the name of a village to go on.

Although the signs of a brutal war are everywhere – destroyed buildings, bodies in the street, traumatised civilians – it's not humans that you'll be fighting. Strange creatures known as Hollow Walkers have flooded Hadea, and it's these that you'll be tackling with melee weapons and special abilities.

The rhythm of combat is a close cousin to Soulslikes – guard, parry, dodge – but, as with the game as a whole, more accessible than you might expect. Parrying is entirely optional, and there are many abilities to be found to stagger or stun enemies. There are options to ramp up the difficulty if you want them, however.

> **"Creatures known as Hollow Walkers have flooded Hadea"**

This fictional country draws from real conflicts for inspiration. You'll encounter sights such as bodies hanging from nooses, and descriptions of war crimes, sometimes told by characters who revel in – or are suffering through – them. There's a dark artfulness to how this world has been crafted, but it's not something to be approached lightly.

Despite a lack of waypoints, maps and explicit objectives, excellent level and mission design ensure that you'll rarely struggle to work out where to go next. There may be rare, frustrating occasions where revisiting a previous location or finding an undiscovered nook is harder than it should be, but you'll persevere. What comes next will be grim, but worth the effort.

Luke Kemp

i Project lead Jonathan Jacques-Belletête says Alex Garland's movie *Annihilation* was an influence on the game's soundscape.

CRONOS: THE NEW DAWN

★★½☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **PC, Nintendo Switch 2, Xbox Series X**
- Publisher **Bloober Team**

VIDEOGAME ***Cronos: The New Dawn*** feels like an interactive mood board at times. There's a good take on a survival horror shooter here, but it's one that bears the shapes of its influences in occasionally stark silhouette.

Dead Space is an obvious source for much of it, from the protagonist's heavy, floor-stomping presence, to her shape-changing gun and enemies with a gruesome gimmick. Whereas *Dead Space* had you "cut off their limbs", here creatures "merge" with bodies to become more powerful.

Gravity-defying, wall-walking sections also feel lifted from EA's space adventure. Elsewhere, *Resident Evil* rears its rotting head, while John Carpenter and '80s body horror loom large.

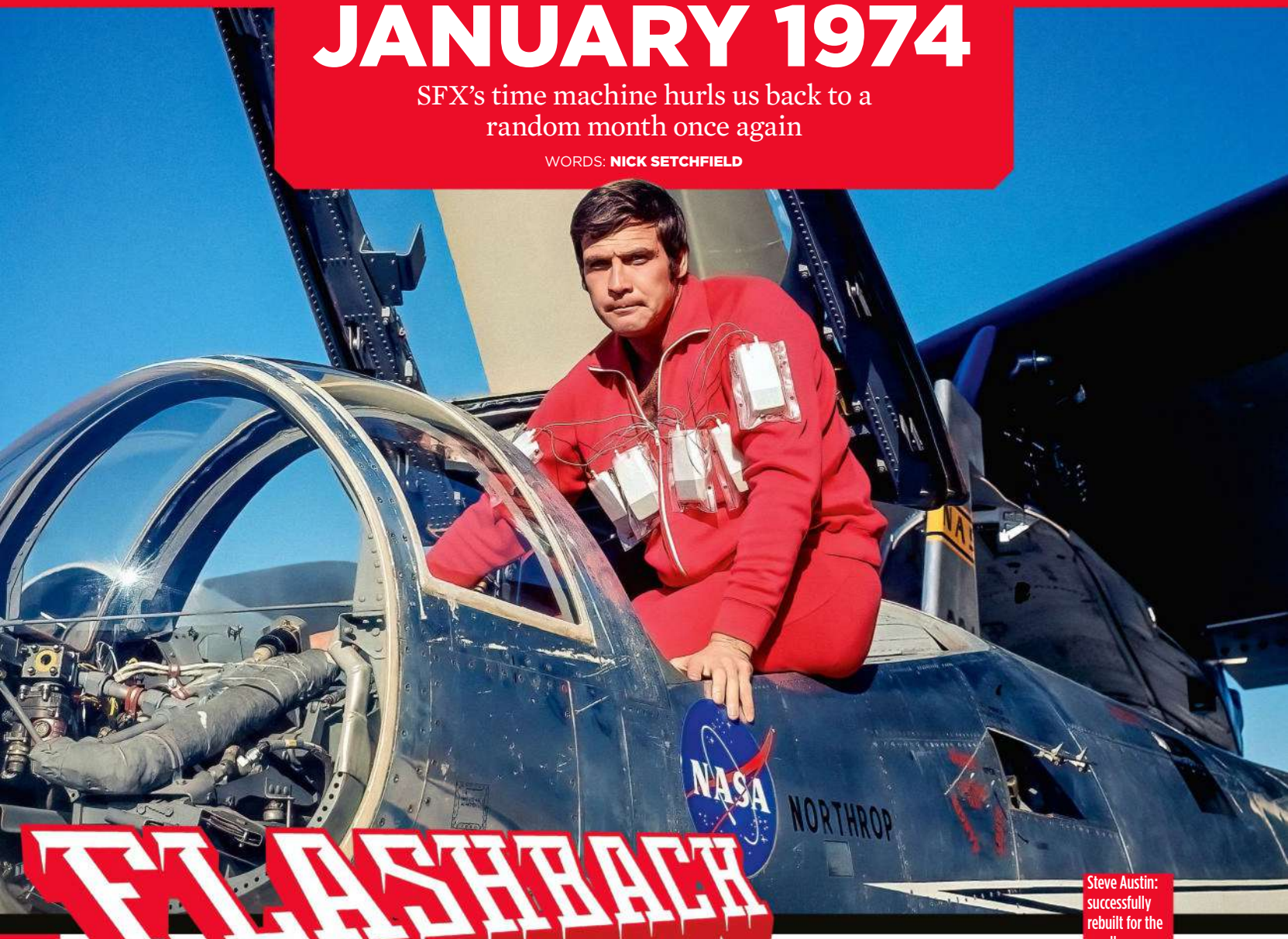
Obviously most horror is derivative, but *Cronos: The New Dawn* can almost feel like a fan game at times, such is its shamelessly replicative adoration. It does build its own identity over time, but it also struggles with a lack of variety.

Having only a few enemy types makes for limited and repetitive combat, with greater numbers the only dial to turn, and a lack of varied texture overall makes what is an otherwise okay experience overstay its welcome in the final hours. **Leon Hurley**

JANUARY 1974

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



Steve Austin: successfully rebuilt for the small screen.

FLASHBACK

Crash Landing

18 JANUARY 1974 Debuting in Martin Caidin's novel *Cyborg*, bionically refurbished astronaut Steve Austin brought his brand of high-tech heroics to three feature-length pilots in 1973. Noting their popularity, Universal TV supremo Frank Price tasked producer Harve Bennett with creating an ongoing series, adding one crucial stipulation: "You have to be on the air in six weeks."

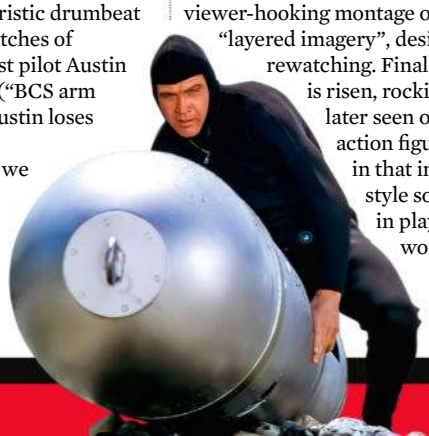
"I thought it was insane," recalled Bennett, who would go on to steer the *Star Trek* movie franchise in the '80s. Committing to the scramble, his first instinct was to retool Austin's screen persona. The recent TV movies had saddled star Lee Majors with a tuxedoed, wannabe-Bondian image. Bennett saw his leading man as more Gary Cooper than Roger Moore, "a cowboy without a horse" – albeit a cowboy who could hit 60mph in his sneakers.

Opening episode "Population: Zero" introduced *The Six Million Dollar Man*'s astonishing title sequence. Created by Jack Cole, it's a masterclass in sustained tension, a micro-movie that not only recaps Austin's origin story, but distills his entire computer age myth: a man barely alive, rebuilt, reborn. We have the technology...

Set against an urgent, militaristic drumbeat are barely comprehensible snatches of conversation between test pilot Austin and NASA command ("BCS arm switch is on!"). As Austin loses control of his experimental craft, we witness dramatic true-life footage of the crash that almost claimed the life of Colonel Bruce Peterson on 10 May 1967. "About what is seen on the TV screens every week is what I remember," said Peterson, who reportedly grew to dislike the regular recycling of his near-death experience. "I blacked out about the same time the cameras stopped working."

The sequence then shifts to the operating theatre, where US tax dollars transform into bleeding-edge technology. Inscrutable digits multiply in the corner of the screen, encephalographic waveforms race, and a gleaming artificial eye stares back at us. It's a viewer-hooking montage of what Cole called "layered imagery", designed to reward rewatching. Finally, our bionic Lord is risen, rocking the red tracksuit later seen on his bestselling action figure and running in that immortal slo-mo style soon to be emulated in playgrounds the world over.

That's Clint Eastwood's leg in the title sequence – or at least the prosthetic made for the amputation scene in *The Beguiled*.



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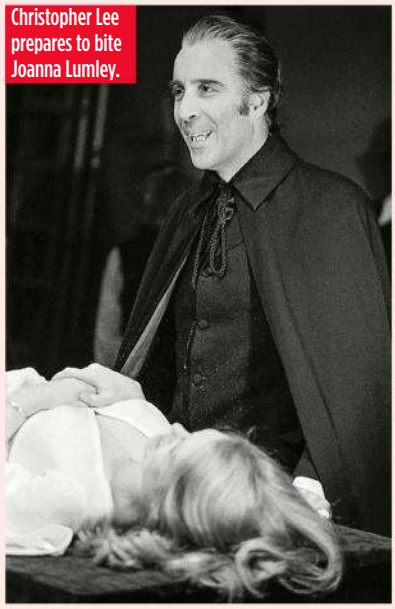

Christopher Lee prepares to bite Joanna Lumley.

BRIAN MOODY/SHUTTERSTOCK

Staked Out

13 JANUARY 1974 Christopher Lee longed for eternal rest – or at least a release from the role that had made him a blood-smeared star. Hammer's *Dracula AD 1972* had already torn the Count from his 19th century hunting grounds, much to Lee's disapproval. Follow-up *The Satanic Rites Of Dracula* would keep him exiled in contemporary London.

In fact, Dracula's aims in the film align with Lee's own desires. Posing as reclusive property developer DD Denham, the monarch of the undead plots to release an apocalyptic virus that will end all life on Earth, putting paid to his own tormented existence. "He'd want to bring down the whole universe with him," says Peter Cushing's Van Helsing. "The ultimate revenge."

There's a sliver of satire in *Satanic Rites* that modern viewers can easily miss. Property development carried clear vampiric connotations as it feasted on the post-war London skyline for maximum profit. Dracula's eerily soulless skyscraper base recalls the monolithic Centre Point, completed in 1966, but still standing empty in 1974 (tenants finally arrived a year later). Rumours surrounded the nature and purpose of this tower, built on the site of a former gallows. Was it a secret base for the Ministry of Defence? Or something more unfathomable?

Opening at London's Rialto with blaxploitation vampire flick *Blacula* in support, *The Satanic Rites Of Dracula* climaxes with Lee entangled in a hawthorn bush, meeting his final end. "I reached my irrevocable full stop," recalled the star, who had publicly dismissed the project as "fatuous, pointless, absurd". Taste the disdain of Dracula...

The Doctor is attacked by a pterodactyl.

© BBC

Whorassic World

12 JANUARY 1974 Jon Pertwee's final season of *Doctor Who* had launched in the dying weeks of 1973, introducing Elisabeth Sladen as new companion Sarah Jane Smith in "The Time Warrior".

If that story spanned the centuries then "Invasion Of The Dinosaurs" leapt entire epochs. Written by series veteran Malcolm Hulke, it found a spookily deserted London menaced by prehistoric reptiles, summoned from the past by an insidious conspiracy.

It was an ambitious scenario, even by *Who* standards. Naturally, it collided head-first with the reality of '70s effects budgets. "They were very good models, but they moved so badly," said producer Barry Letts. "It was very, very obvious that they were models."

This story also saw the debut of the Whomobile, a sleek, futuristic vehicle bankrolled by Pertwee himself. Alas, the star's imminent departure meant it only appeared one more time, gaining the power of flight in season finale "Planet Of The Spiders".

DAVID WARNER ELLIS/REDFERNS/GETTY

IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Edward Heath
- **US President:** Richard Nixon
- **In the charts:** Mud's "Tiger Feet" deposes The New Seekers, abetted by roadies joining in the primitive dance moves on *Top Of The Pops*.
- **In the news:** New Year's Day is celebrated as a public holiday across the UK for the first time; the Three Day Week is introduced by the government in a bid to conserve electricity during strikes by coal miners; the first surviving sextuplets are born in South Africa.

ON THE SHELF

- On sale 3 January, issue 131 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* sees the nuttiest nuptials in Marvel history as Aunt May gets hitched to Doctor Octopus.

© MARVEL COMICS

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

POST-APOCALYPSES

It's the end of the world as we know it... but you'll feel fine if you rack up a good score

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
What connects Vincent Price, Charlton Heston and Will Smith?

QUESTION 2
In the mid-'90s, Kevin Costner directed and starred in two different post-apocalyptic movies. Name them both.

QUESTION 3
Which author wrote the post-apocalyptic novels *The Drowned World* and *The Burning World*?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this post-apocalyptic film from the poster detail.

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 5
In *The Book Of Eli*, what's the big twist about the Bible that's the central MacGuffin?

QUESTION 6
Who was the creator of ITV's 1999 post-apocalyptic drama series *The Last Train*?

QUESTION 7
Which pair of rock musicians composed the score for *The Road*?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify this TV series from the screengrab of the title sequence.

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 9
Which post-apocalyptic TV series is based on a series of books titled *Wool*, *Shift* and *Dust*?

QUESTION 10
What TV show are a group of children seen watching at the start of *28 Years Later*?

QUESTION 11
In which 2008 film does a team venture into a walled-off, quarantined Scotland?

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify this post-apocalyptic animated film.

QUESTION 13
Which American TV series centres around a destroyer called USS Nathan James?

QUESTION 14
Name the director responsible for the Italian films *1990: The Bronx Warriors*, *The New Barbarians* and *Escape From The Bronx*.

QUESTION 15
Under what alternative title was *Mad Max 2* released in the USA?

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this post-apocalyptic comic from the artwork.

QUESTION 17
Which 2013 film had the working title *One Thousand AE*?

QUESTION 18
Who created the early-'00s post-apocalyptic TV series *Jeremiah*?

QUESTION 19
In which 1975 film would you find a telepathic pooch called Blood?

QUESTION 20
Which TV series is set two centuries after the Great War of 2077?

Answers
1 They've all starred in films based on *I Am Legend* 2 *Waterworld*, *The Postman* 3 JG Ballard 4 *Damnation Alley* 5 It's written in braille 6 Matthew Graham 7 Nick Cave and Warren Ellis 8 *Survivors* 9 *Silo* 10 *Teletubbies* 11 *Doomsday* 12 *Nausicaä Of The Valley Of The Wind* 13 *The Last Ship* 14 Enzo G Castellari 15 *The Road Warrior* 16 *Y: The Last Man* 17 *After Earth* 18 J Michael Straczynski 19 *A Boy And His Dog* 20 *Fallout*

How did you do?

How long would you survive?

0-5
Half an hour

6-10
A week

11-15
Six months

16-19
Five years

20
20 years

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"Cake doesn't rhyme with lemonade"

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

ALL CONTENTS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE, LIKE DECIDING YOU WANT A PIECE OF THE PIE, EVEN THOUGH IT'S NOT A FILM FRANCHISE

SFX 398 ON SALE 5 NOV

IT'S ALL BEEN BUILDING TO THIS

RETURN TO HAWKINS
ONE. LAST. TIME.

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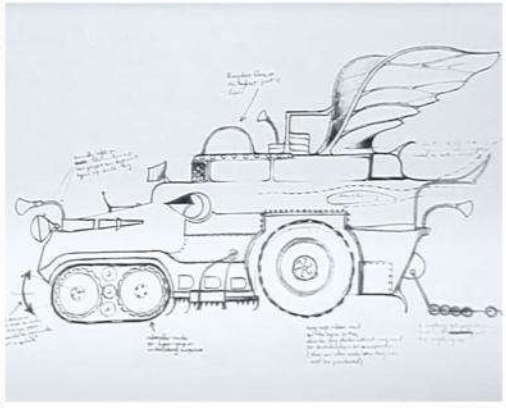
Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



Crown Court "Destruct, Destruct"

Nick Setchfield, Editor At Large

Watched by housewives, "the jobless" and legions of flu-riddled, Lucozade-sipping kids, afternoon telly in the '70s was usually the safest of spaces.

Sure, *Crown Court* offered up the occasional juicy murder among its property disputes, muggings and fraud claims, but you never suspected that it might be doused in pure nightmare fuel and ready to hand you the match. A dependable, oddly melancholy fixture of the post-lunch schedule, it dramatised fictional criminal cases in front of a jury of genuine members of the public, plucked from the electoral registers of Granadaland.

It was the late summer of 1973 when the Case of the Queen against Ainsworth scarred me forever. Ominously titled "Destruct, Destruct", the three-part story opens with a scene of stark urban horror that could have escaped from a particularly vicious Public Information Film. Two children chase a boy into a derelict site. After lashing him to a post, one puts a plastic bag over his head, suffocating him to death. And we're only 90 seconds in...

The accused is 13-year-old Philip Ainsworth, radiating all the pubescent menace of Damien Thorn as he smirks in the courtroom. Philip, it transpires, was simply playing Rexors, "a game about robots that come down to take over the Earth" – and, yes, exterminate all humans. Like Daleks? "No, not like Daleks," scoffs Jane, Philip's accomplice in the killing. "Daleks talk, don't they? Have funny voices... Rexors can't speak. They make sort of rumbling noises."

The clearly disturbed Philip is Rexor in Chief, possessed by his own creations. As the camera closes in on the young psychopath, we hear strange radiophonic sounds, as if these supposedly imaginary monsters are so utterly real, they possess the power to hijack the TV signal itself.

"There are things... things in Philip," his mother tells us, chillingly, just before the jury is shown a sketch of a Rexor, discovered in the depths of the boy's bedroom. It looks like a tank cross-bred with a dragon, all caterpillar tracks. high-tech wings and obsessively annotated details. Reader, it shat me up.

"It isn't just make-believe about the Rexors!" protests Philip, as sentencing approaches. "One day soon we'll all have to make up our minds which side we're on!"

Sometimes I still find myself wondering – what if he was right?

Nick has no further questions for the witness, your honour.

Fact Attack!

- The wings on the Rexor are, Philip explains, part of a telescopic web system that enables the creature to track fleeing humans.
- Why suffocation? It's seen as a mark of Rexor supremacy over humans: "They need to breathe and we do not."
- The story was written by Bruce Stewart, whose genre credits include two episodes of *Out Of The Unknown* and 19 of *Timeslip*.
- The consultant child psychologist in the case is played by horror icon Michael Gough, later known as Alfred in the *Batman* films.
- Derek Hockridge, who played the Clerk of Court in 175 episodes of *Crown Court*, also co-translated the *Asterix* books into English.

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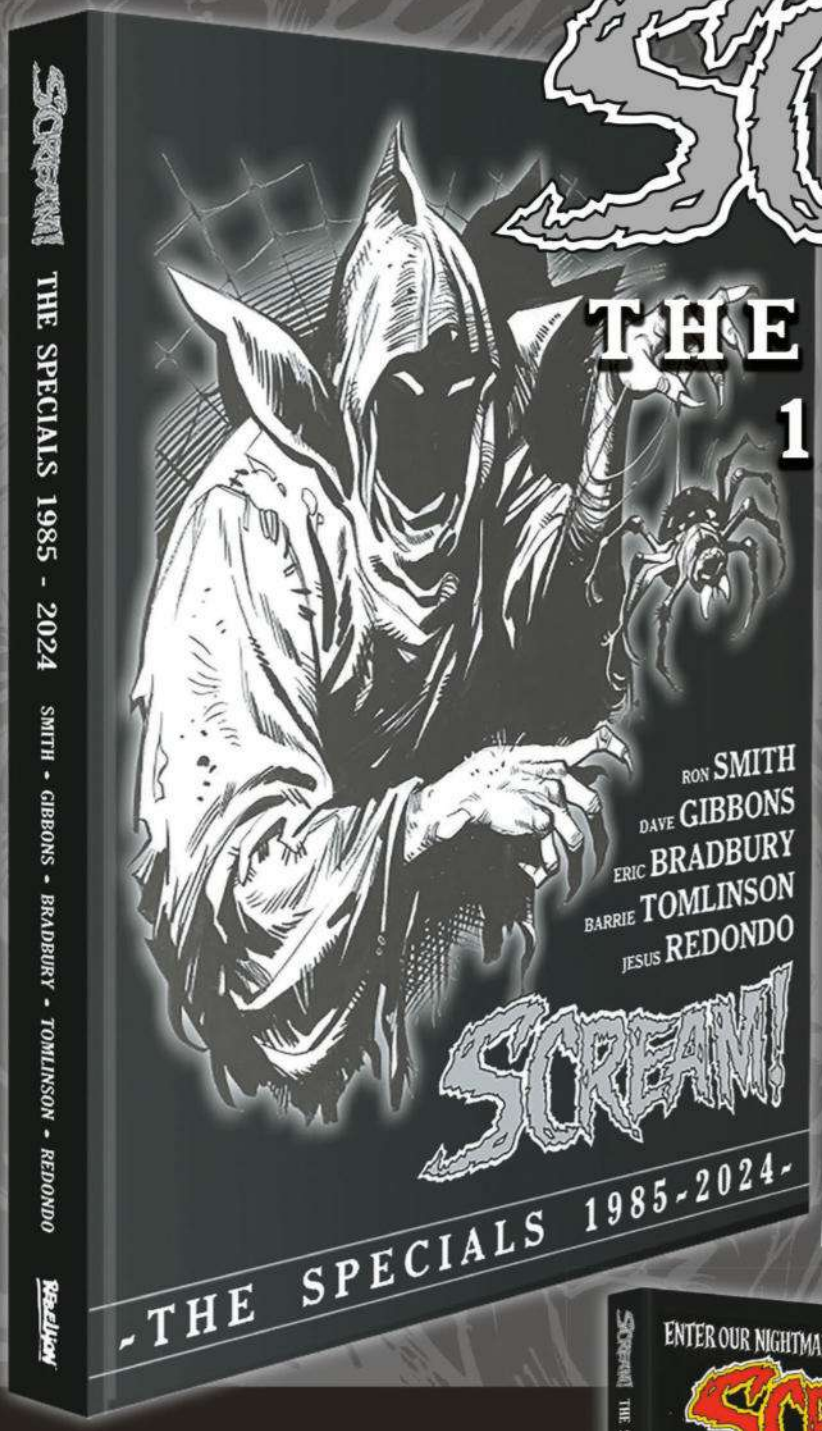
SCREAM!

THE SPECIALS 1985-2024



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